MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY

Magazine

Issue #41

$5.95
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"Gryphon Rider"
by Cherith Baldry

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Marion Zimmer Bradley,
and Carrie Martin

MZB's Grammar Pet Peeves

Interview: Nancy Springer

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Cover by Carl Lundgren

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The Flesh, the Blood, and the Fire

S. A. Swiniarski — *JULY*

0-88677-879-4 $5.99 ($6.99 in Canada)

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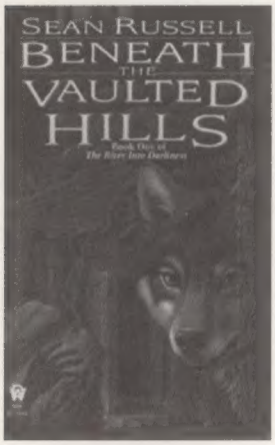

Beneath the Vaulted Hills

(*The River into Darkness, Book One*) — *AUGUST*

Sean Russell

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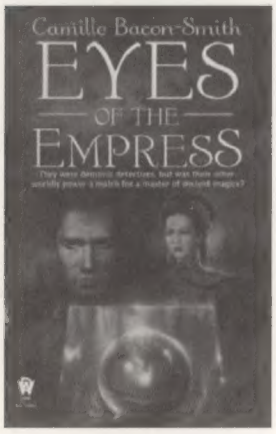

The Eyes of the Empress

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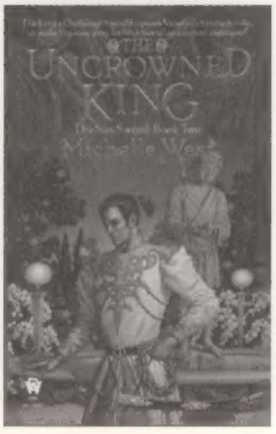

The Uncrowned King

(The Sun Sword, #2)

Michelle West — *SEPTEMBER*

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EDITORIAL

"Begin at the beginning," said the Caterpillar, "and go on until you reach the end. Then stop." — Lewis Carroll.

There are many articles telling you how to start your story. A good rule of thumb is to start it at the last moment at which things are normal for the protagonist before the events of the story begin to take place. For instance, in **GONE WITH THE WIND** — a splendid example of a commercial novel — the first chapter starts a day or so before the soldiers fired on Fort Sumter and touched off the events of the War Between the States — I call it that because the book is laid in the South and therefore it cannot be called the Civil War — only us Yankees called it that.

But where do you end your story? How do you know when you've told everything you need to tell and should stop before it becomes, well, an anticlimax?

That's a little trickier. In the film ***STAR WARS***, for instance, the movie ended not at the moment when the Death Star was blown up, which would at first have seemed logical, but when the heroes received their medals. Why? What made the writers of the film decide to show the ceremony where they all received medals? Just because it made a good scene? I think it's at the moment when you know the characters are going to be all right. My first example, **GONE WITH THE WIND**, does not end — at least in the book — I'm not so sure about the movie — when Clark Gable says, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" — but when Scarlett decides to return to her roots and think about all that tomorrow, at Tara. One may or may not like Scarlett, but we know that with or without Rhett, once she is at Tara, she'll be all right, because that's the kind of person she is. In Vina Delmar's **THE LAUGHING STRANGER**, there's an equally quick and simple end. After the "evil" woman, Brandy, who has disrupted everybody's life, is dead, and they are left with the problem of Brandy's child to solve, the aunt, or maybe the father puts the child into the young crippled narrator's arms and says, "I have solved it." Nothing more; she could have gone on for two or three chapters telling what happened to them all afterward or how the child grew up to be like or not to be like Brandy, but we know the family's going to be all right for the moment.

One of my favorite novels ends like that almost too quickly. Dorothy Macardle's very fine ghost story, **THE UNINVITED,** which I think is the best ghost story ever written, ends after the ghosts are banished — I won't say how — hunt up the book and read it sometime — when Pamela cries out, "The ghosts are gone, and we're staying at Cliff House" — which is what they all wanted — Lizzie caps off the story by saying, "Well, God bless us every one."

I could multiply my examples endlessly. You try it. Line up half a dozen of your favorite stories and figure out why the author chose to end his — or her— story just where he did. Should he have gone on for another page? Another pararaph? Maybe he should — nobody's perfect. You be the judge.

Marion Zimmer Bradley

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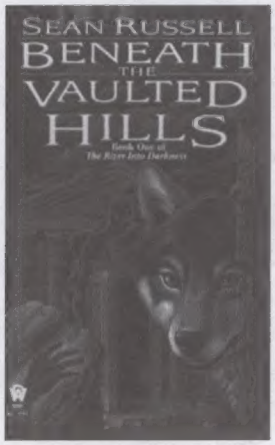

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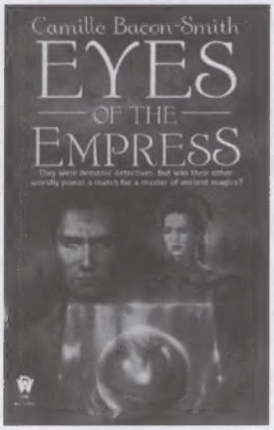

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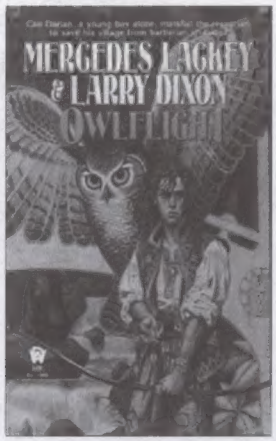

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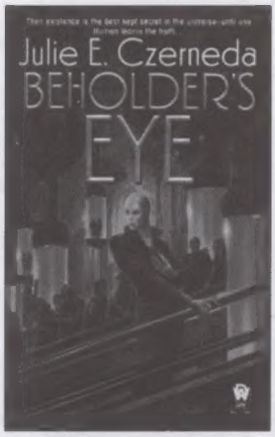
They are the last survivors of their race, beings who live on and communicate through energy, capable of assuming the shape of any other species. When their youngest member is captured, she must violate the most important rule of her kind—she must reveal the existence of her species to a stranger—a human....

From the author of *A Thousand Words for Stranger*



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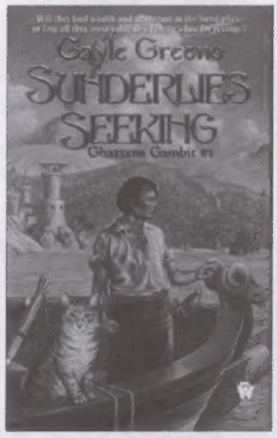

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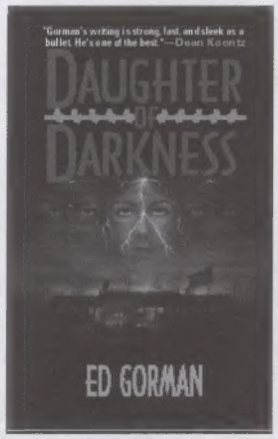
Found in an alley, dazed, with no identification, a young woman is forced to turn to former cop Michael Coffey for help. Pursuing her one memory, they go to a hazily recalled motel, where they find only her blood-splattered clothes and a brutally murdered man....

"Gorman's writing is strong, fast, and sleek as a bullet. He's one of the best." —Dean Koontz



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EDITOR
Marion Zimmer Bradley

PUBLISHER
Rachel E. Holmen

GRAPHIC ARTIST
Margaret Davis

SECRETARY TO MRS. BRADLEY:
Elisabeth Waters

PROOFREADING
Gil Lamont
Debbie Notkin

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Tiger, Tiger

by Carol E. Leever

Jeweled butterflies fluttering in the flower-strewn forest proved far too distracting to Neko. The thirty golden cats that walked silently beside her suddenly perked their ears forward and then swiftly vanished amongst the pine and alder trees. Out of the corner of her eye, Neko caught a brief glimpse of a puffed golden tail disappearing behind a flowering bush just before she felt something tangle around her legs. Her world spun upside down, coarse ropes tightening around her body as the ground beneath her shot swiftly away. A moment later she was bouncing in the air.

It took her only a moment to realize she'd stepped into a hunter's net, suspended now from a bowed tree branch high in the air. Humiliation burned brightly in her cheeks. Some great warrior she'd turned out to be! She'd walked into that trap like a novice!

A golden feline face peered at her from behind a bright pink flower. Whiskers bristling, large slanted eyes blinking in surprise, the cat had a look of amusement on his face as he watched the trapped girl bouncing in the net.

"You could have warned me!" Neko shouted down to him furiously. Obviously the temple cats had seen the net. They could have said something!

Neko sighed and rolled her eyes. What was it the cats and the other Kami spirit-folk had taught her? Self-awareness was the key to self-defense. Maybe her fighting ability did rival that of any samurai, but she'd failed miserably when it came to awareness. Butterflies! She'd been watching butterflies like some playful little kitten. Which probably explained why all the Kami had given her the use-name of Little Feline. They only ever used her more formal adult-name Cat-Dancing when she succeeded in some task they'd set to her. Right now she suspected she wouldn't even be granted her child-name of Neko — Idiot was probably the name that sprang to their fuzzy little minds at the moment.

She twisted and turned trying to free herself from the net, wishing for the hundredth time that she had a knife or better yet a razor sharp katana. But when she'd abandoned her father's house in favor of the spirit-haunted woods, she'd given up all chances of ever earning the honorable weapon of a samurai. If the Kami didn't help her now, she suspected she'd have to chew her way through the ropes.

The sounds of loud shouting echoed through the sun-drenched woods, and a moment later the ground beneath the net was filled with bamboo-wielding peasants. They glared fiercely up at Neko. One peasant, Neko noticed in alarm, was even carrying a wicked looking farm-tool, a deadly weapon if used properly.

"We caught him! We caught him!" one of the peasants yelled in glee. A young man raised his bamboo staff to strike Neko.

"Hey!" Neko cried in alarm. "Stop that!"

She flinched, expecting to feel the blow of the bamboo against her spine, but the peasant caught himself before he struck. "What?" he demanded, peering intently up at her.

"That's no demon!" another peasant,

Artwork by Alicia Austin

an old man with a kindly face, exclaimed. "It's a girl! Mitsaru, you caught a little girl!"

Mitsaru, the man about to strike, stared up at Neko in furious disappointment. "It can't be! I saw hundreds of cats! It's the tiger-demon. I know it is!"

Tiger-demon? Neko frowned. The Kami had said nothing about a demon in the area.

"They do say that demons can change shape," another man warned.

"Cut her down," the old man ordered with a shake of his head. "We made a mistake, just admit it. Besides I rather doubt that a simple hunting net is going to trap a demon."

Amid a great deal of grumbling, one of the peasant eventually began sawing at the rope that held the net in place. A moment later Neko fell, hitting the hard ground with a loud thud that nearly knocked the wind out of her. Catching her breath, she struggled out of the tangled net and quickly stood.

Rather than being relieved at the sight of her, the peasants stared at her in shock, raising their weapons once again. Neko sighed, bracing herself for a fight. To a group of men searching for a tiger-demon, she knew she must look like evil incarnate. If her odd golden-colored skin and too large cat-slanted eyes didn't give her away, then the silk dragon-made clothing she wore, the white crane feathers tied in her hair, and the shining cat's eye medallion around her neck certainly would mark her as something more (or less) than human.

"It is the demon!" Mitsaru cried, and he swung his bamboo staff at her.

In one fluid movement, Neko snatched the staff out of the man's hand, crouched and spun, sweeping Mitsaru's feet out from under him. She tossed the second man who attacked her over her shoulder, never missing a beat as she tangled the third man's farm-tool with the bamboo staff and knocked the fourth and fifth men down with carefully placed punches.

She straightened, bamboo staff in one hand, rice flailer in the other. The two remaining men still standing hesitated, their eyes on their fallen companions. Neko calmly kicked their bamboo staffs out of their hands.

"Now, stop it! All of you!" she scolded, watching as the five men she'd knocked down slowly rose to their feet. Farmers all of them, she knew they'd had absolutely no training as warriors. She regretted having to bruise any of them. "I'm no demon. I'm as human as the next person." More or less — she didn't really know what she was; the Kami had never bothered to tell her.

"Samurai," the old man said in horror.

Neko realized with some shock that they were actually more afraid of the samurai than they were of their tiger-demon. Of course she couldn't really blame them — the samurai had probably killed more of them testing the edge of a new weapon than any demon ever had.

"No," she shook her head, the crane feathers fluttering around her face. "I'm more of a ronin warrior than anything else." She wasn't certain if they'd be even more afraid of a masterless war-

Artwork by Alicia Austin

Artwork by Alicia Austin

rior than they would a samurai, but at least they made no further move to attack her.

"Forgive us, Mistress!" one of the other men begged, quickly bowing to her. The others bowed in turn, looks of horror on their faces.

Neko respectfully returned their bows, trying to indicate that she wasn't angry. "You may call me Feline," she offered, giving them a use-name in an effort to keep things as informal as possible.

"Forgive us, Feline-San," the old man greeted, tacking a title of honor to her use-name. She felt odd receiving such an honorific from so old and kindly-looking a man. Despite her skill as a warrior, she was only fourteen years old.

She bowed again to all the men. "I'm very sorry I frightened you," she told them honestly. "Perhaps if you tell me about this tiger-demon I could help you." She offered back the bamboo staff and the farming tool she'd taken in the fight, but none of the men came forward. Instead they bowed nervously to her again.

Sighing she looked expectantly at the old man. His old wrinkled face was deeply lined with worry and fear, but he moved cautiously forward. "I'm Kirusata, village elder," he explained. "For the last month our village has been attacked by a great tiger-demon. It has injured dozens of us. We had hoped to trap it."

She frowned at the net that had started this whole nonsense, and then glanced doubtfully up at the sky. Deep blue with only a few puffy white clouds marring its expanse, it was bright with golden sunlight. "In the daylight?" she asked. "As far as I know both demons and tigers are nocturnal creatures."

"We had hoped to trap it before it reached our village," Kirusata explained. "It takes this path from the old ruins in the hills to our village every evening. We intended to wait here all night if necessary."

Neko could see the terror in the old man's eyes, a terror that was deeply reflected in the eyes of all the peasant men. They knew nothing about battling either demons or tigers. Neither did she — but for the past year she had been a student of the Kami. She could think of no better test of her martial skill than to help these poor men defeat their nemesis.

"Go back to your village and defend your families," she told all of them, tossing their weapons on the ground before them. "I'll go to these ruins and take care of the demon myself."

Relief and doubt warred in the tired eyes of Kirusata, and he glanced thoughtfully over at Mitsaru. "Perhaps you should take some of the younger men with you?" he suggested uncertainly.

Neko glanced at Mitsaru and the other young men, seeing determination and fear in all their eyes. Without any training they'd simply get in her way and probably get themselves killed.

"No," she told them. "It's better if I go alone. You can best serve your village if you protect your homes from any of the demon's servants that might be prowling about."

Alarm flared through the men's eyes at the mention of servants, and though Neko sincerely doubted that any such creatures existed, her warning did the trick. The peasants hastily agreed to let her go alone, and bid her good luck. A few moments later they were hurrying back home to the relative safety of their small village.

The Kami were conspicuously absent as Neko made her way through the butterfly-filled woods along the path the villagers had indicated. She didn't expect their help. The spirit-folk of the woods were her teachers. They would help her learn everything she could about herself, but they would give her no aid against a demon. But she was certain of one thing — they would watch closely and curiously to see how their student fared. She intended to make them proud.

The sun began dipping down in the west as Neko wandered deeper into the thick woodlands toward the old ruins. The butterflies began drifting away, the woods filling with sounds of night-singing insects. Amid the soft glow of sunset Neko went over various strategies in her head.

The Kami had taught her many styles of fighting, but she was uncertain still which was the best. She'd been very impressed with the quick, vicious motions of Mantis style until she'd seen the strong-armed Monkey techniques defeat it. So she'd learned the Monkey style only to see one of the delicate, seemingly fragile Cranes defeat that. She'd seen Tiger style defeat the Crane, Dragon defeat the Tiger, and Mantis defeat the Dragon. One style after an-

other — an eternal circle. She studied them all. Linear motion, circular motion, soft style, hard style — one movement progressed naturally into the next, but the basic truths of what she learned still eluded her at times.

"It's a tiger-demon," she reasoned out loud. Crane would work if she could move fast enough to keep the tiger at a distance. If the Tiger got hold of the Crane it would tear it apart.

"So if it gets a hold of me, I switch to Monkey style," she reasoned, thinking that the grappling and shaking motions of the Monkey style would defend her. She could then turn the demon's own tactics on it and defeat it with Tiger style.

"Awareness," she told herself, remembering the very lesson she'd failed earlier. "I just have to keep my head and remain aware of what's going on around me."

Through the thick cluster of trees up ahead she saw reddish sunlight gleaming off the stones of an old temple. She crept slowly forward, crouching down near a scented dogwood plant to hide. She peered out through the foliage, her gaze searching the ruins for some sign of the demon.

The walls of the temple had long ago crumbled away, the area thickly overgrown with flowering vines and brush. The moss-covered flagstones of the main courtyard were so cracked and uprooted they resembled more an obstacle course than a walkway. The temple itself, no longer possessing a graceful flaring tiled roof, had trees growing up through the center of it. Stone gods still guarded the sacred ground, but their once-jeweled eyes and golden horns and wings had long ago been stripped away.

Neko saw no sign of a demon, but the temple possessed enough dark corners and holes to hide either demon or tiger. She settled down to wait, her gaze intent on the temple before her, ears poised to catch any sound. Slowly the sun sank beneath the far horizon, bathing the dark woods in reddish light. An evening breeze, scented with pine and cherry wood, stirred to life as the pale moon appeared amongst the glittering stars of night.

The sound of claws scraping against stone followed by the velvety whisper of large paws in the dust alerted Neko to approaching danger. She straightened, body tensed as she searched the ruins for her foe.

From out of a dark shadow in the temple's crumbling interior, she saw the flame-colored shape of a tiger emerging. She caught her breath, staring in awe at the deadly creature. Not a demon perhaps, the tiger was still huge, his massive body rippling with muscles, his glittering eyes hungry and baleful. Neko could see the sharp tips of the huge claws encased in each wicked paw. The tiger let out a low throaty growl, his open mouth revealing long white fangs in powerful jaws.

Neko swallowed nervously. This was worse than a demon! She could well imagine this tiger carrying off children and swallowing them whole. It probably outweighed her by four hundred pounds. She'd rather take on a whole army of samurai than a hungry tiger.

But she'd promised the villagers she'd stop him.

Neko steeled her heart, reminding herself that this was just a tiger after all. She had spent the last year sparring with the Kami — with cats and foxes, monkeys and cranes, dogs and dragons. One lone tiger shouldn't prove too much for her. Not if she'd learned her lessons properly. *Only one way to find out*, she reasoned, and she stepped into the moonlit courtyard.

The tiger spotted her immediately. Pulling back his lips, he let out a loud, terrifying snarl. The black stripes in the plush orange fur made his face look demonic, those eyes glittering wickedly in the moonlight. He crouched back on his powerful hind legs, his thick tail flicking angrily back and forth as he swiped viciously at the air with one deadly claw. Head cocked, ears flat, he snarled again, and Neko got a clear look at the sharp white teeth in that too-large mouth.

Heart pounding like thunder in her chest, Neko braced herself, weight poised over the balls of her feet, hands open and set before her.

"Crane," she told herself. A fluttering of wings to confuse and fluster the tiger; open armed strikes against those powerful shoulders to bruise and trip. He'd go for her throat, but she'd dodge and kick. Powerful and muscular he might be — but a well-placed kick to those ribs would surely break them. She just had to stay out of reach of those claws.

The tiger's muscles bunched, and with one powerful roar he leaped, lunging toward Neko with deadly intent. Five hundred pounds of fur and muscle

Artwork by Alicia Austin

flew through the air toward her. Moving swiftly, she stepped gracefully out of the creature's way, her arms and hands moving in a deadly pattern of strikes and blows. She felt her strikes connect with fur and taut skin. A blow to the shoulder, the throat, the back of the leg — an elbow against that thick rib cage. The tiger roared, and Neko turned, her feet sure against the ground as she held her balance perfectly and poised herself for another attack.

But the tiger was just as swift. He turned in mid lunge to swipe at her with his powerful claws. Neko snapped her right hand forward in imitation of the quick blows of a mantis. Her knuckles connected with the tiger's skull, and she felt the warm gush of blood as she tore furry skin. But at that same instant, the tiger's claws ripped across her left thigh, tearing through the thin silk covering of her clothes and cutting open her flesh.

Neko screamed in pain, automatically flinging herself back in a graceful acrobatic flip that took her out of reach of those deadly claws. Her left leg nearly crumbled beneath her as she landed, the terrible gash gushing blood.

The tiger lunged again. Neko raised her hands like claws, striking, scratching, tearing, ripping. She felt hot blood beneath her fingers as she tore the creature's ear. But as the tiger stumbled backward in pain, his claws shot out and connected with the tender flesh of Neko's right arm. Pain burned through Neko's body as she stumbled back, desperate to catch her weight beneath her trembling legs.

The tiger paused in his attack, swiping furiously at the blood stinging his eyes. Like the giant cat he was, he licked one paw and rubbed at his ear, shaking his head in bewildered pain. Seeing her brief reprieve, Neko bolted for the dark forest, racing away on stumbling feet as she sought the security of the trees.

She ran breathlessly through the dark woods, glancing repeatedly over her shoulder to search for some sign of the tiger's pursuit. Behind her the thick trees closed in, blocking the temple from sight. Weak from pain and blood loss, Neko finally stopped, her body vibrating from shock. She listened carefully, her hypersensitive hearing picking up only the sound of the wind in the trees and the soft fall of leaves against the ground.

Artwork by Alicia Austin

She staggered, gasping as she collapsed. Far in the distance a new sound echoed through the woods — soft crystals tinkling against each other. The musical piping of reed flutes joined the singing crystals, and amid the shadows of the trees Neko saw flaring torches gleaming all around her. She shuddered and sighed, her back against the rough bark of a pine tree, her heart still thundering like a drum. The fragrant scent of plum blossoms filled the night air.

They moved in from all sides, surrounding her in a ghostly glow of moonlight and flames. The cats came first, clad in golden silk robes, their human bodies moving silently and gracefully, their cat heads set with unreadable expressions. Behind them came the foxes, red and white silk robes barely hiding their thick fox tails. One carried a thin sprig of willow bark in his hand that he handed to Neko. She stuck the bark in her mouth, chewing quickly, praying the medicine in its woody sap would dampen the pain in her body.

The cranes fluttered past them, their white robes flaring like wings. Several of them carried thick white strands of spider webs, and as they clustered around Neko they pressed the webs into the gashes on her leg and arm. The webs mingled with hot blood and clotted, sealing the wounds and slowing the bleeding.

The dragons stepped out of the shadows, their multifaceted, jeweled eyes flaring in the moonlight. With a rustle of red silk one of them knelt gracefully beside Neko. The dragon raised his

delicate human hands and plucked out one of the long trailing whiskers from his own draconic face. With a golden needle he began stitching closed Neko's wounds, working swiftly but carefully. Neko chewed harder on the willow bark as she squeezed her eyes shut against the pain that even the dragon's needle imparted.

When the dragon was done, a cat with large jade eyes and delicate tufts of fur on the tips of her ears moved forward. She carried in her hands dark green moss that she bound against Neko's stitched wounds.

"Silly Little Feline," the cat scolded, the first of the Kami to speak. The others watched her with doubtful expressions on their inhuman faces, and Neko squirmed in shame. She'd failed again!

"I don't understand," Neko sighed to all of them — these her teachers whom she'd wanted so much to impress. "I've learned everything you've taught me. I've studied all the styles. What went wrong? I hit the tiger with some Crane strikes, and wounded him with some Tiger strikes — but he still won. If I hadn't run, he would have killed me. Should I have used Mantis, or Dragon, or Monkey?"

The cat twitched her furry ears, her whiskers flaring thoughtfully. "Answer me these questions, Little Feline," she commanded, her soft purring voice holding Neko's complete attention. "Which is smarter? A mantis or a crane?"

Neko thought for a moment, frowning. "Well, the crane I suppose, since it eats the mantis."

The cat nodded. "Which is smarter? A crane or a tiger?"

Neko thought she could see where this was leading, so she answered dutifully. "The tiger obviously."

Again the cat nodded. "Which is smarter? A tiger or a human?"

"A human," Neko replied decisively. A human might indeed be smarter than the tiger — but that didn't explain to her why she'd lost the fight to the tiger. Smarter or dumber, the tiger had proven to be the better fighter.

"Answer me this last question, and you will have all the knowledge you need to defeat your enemy," the cat told her then. "Which is smarter? A tiger, or a human pretending to be a tiger?"

Neko stared at the cat in silence, blinking slowly in shock as the cat flicked her ears and stood up. The Kami did not wait for her answer. One by one they disappeared into the dark woods leaving Neko alone with her thoughts.

Slowly and painfully, she rose to her feet, grateful for the Kami's careful ministrations but angry at herself for being such a fool. Mindful of her injuries, she began the long march back toward the village.

The sun was beginning to rise as Neko entered the village. Seeing her, the village peasants rushed out of their small huts to greet her, amazed and awed to see her still alive, anxious over her injuries.

"They're nothing," she assured them when several of the women offered to tend her wounds. "I'll be fine." "And what of the demon?" Kirusata asked warily.

Neko shrugged. "You won't have to worry about it again. I'll take care of it this evening. But I need to borrow some things from you."

Eager to help, they gave her the horse and cart she asked for, along with flint and torches. At her request, the women gathered thick bamboo poles and under Neko's instructions tied them together to form a strong cage. Loading the cage onto the back of the cart, Neko bid them all good-bye and headed back down the road toward the temple ruins. The villagers watched her anxiously but none of them dared follow.

Knowing the tiger was probably asleep deep inside the temple's bowels, Neko spent the rest of the day quietly gathering together dried brush and twigs. She positioned the brush in piles around the mossy courtyard; then, unhitching the horse and moving it to safely, she maneuvered the cart with the cage to one side of the courtyard. She sat down to wait for the tiger to emerge.

As the sun was beginning to set far in the west, Neko took the flint and lit two of the heavy, oil-soaked torches. They burst into flame, casting flickering shadows all around her as night deepened. She heard a familiar, throaty growl, and from out of the darkness of the temple the flame-colored tiger stepped forth. Immediately, Neko set alight the clustered piles of brush. Dry as bones, they exploded with fire, flaring with light and smoke as the wood was consumed. The tiger, recognizing the deadly flame as a mortal enemy, screeched in terror.

Blinded by the flaring light, panicked by the crackling flame, the tiger rushed around the courtyard in confusion. When he neared Neko she swung her burning torches at his striped face, and he flinched away in mortal fear. He tried to escape to the safety of the woods, but Neko kept dogging his steps, herding him with her torches and the burning pyres toward the cart. The piles of brush she'd gathered formed a pathway toward the cart, and pushed on by the torches in Neko's hands the tiger had no choice but to move in the direction Neko intended.

The frightened creature, no longer so fearsome or frightening, cried plaintively, swiping several times at Neko's torches. But the heat of the fire singed his fur, and he whimpered, seeking safety. Neko backed him up toward the cart, and having no place else to go, he leaped into the cage. Immediately Neko slammed the cage door shut and latched it.

Caged, frightened and furious, the tiger roared in rage, but once Neko moved away and began putting out the dwindling flames of the pyres, he calmed. He lay helplessly down in the cage, his ears flattened back in fury, his eyes gleaming in defeat. When Neko retrieved the horse and approached the cart, the tiger growled at her but made no move to attack. He seemed to know instinctively when he'd been beaten.

Neko hitched up the horse and began the journey back toward the village. Though it was still dark, the peasants, watching in fear from their huts, came quickly out to greet her. They stared in amazement at the huge tiger in the cage. They flinched away when he roared and snarled rattling the bamboo poles that held him trapped.

"Here is your demon," Neko announced. "It won't bother you again."

"Are you going to skin it!" several of the men asked, made brave by the tiger's imprisonment. They jabbed at the creature through the bars of the cage.

"A tiger that has proven himself time and time again to be far smarter than most humans?" Neko asked. "Not hardly."

"But it has injured so many of us!" the villagers protested. "It would have eaten us!"

"That's what tigers do," Neko replied sympathetically. She didn't much care for the way the villagers were jabbing sticks at the poor tiger. She felt suddenly eager to move on. "If you enter his hunting ground, he'll hunt

you. That's not the tiger's fault. I'll bring the horse and cart back to you in a few days."

Neko clucked the reins of the horse and drove the cart out of the village. Behind her, the peasants gathered at the end of the road and watched her leave. They faded into the shadows of night as Neko and her tiger disappeared into the forest.

She drove the tiger high into the mountains to a deep green, untouched section of forest far away from human settlements. There, amid the scented shadows of tall ancient trees, she cautiously opened the cage and let the tiger go. Tasting freedom, the tiger wasted no time with revengeful attacks, but raced away into the protecting woodlands and disappeared far from sight.

As Neko watched him run, she noticed thirty golden temple cats emerging from the flowering foliage around her. Though they said nothing, merely flicked their ears and twitched their tails, Neko sensed that they were pleased. Softly, all of them began to purr, and Neko grinned in satisfaction. Even a silly Little Feline who sometimes forgot that she wasn't a Tiger could do something right occasionally. Self-awareness suddenly took on a whole new meaning.

❄

Carol E. Leever works as a high school English teacher in California — a job definitely not for the sane or weak at heart. She is an avid reader and holds black belts in Kosho Shorei Kempo and Kung Fu (sounds impressive to her students and gives her plenty of story ideas). She spends all her free time writing surrounded by her three cats who seem determined to find a comfortable seat on top of her computer. She hopes one day to write a novel about the characters in this story.

Alicis Austin's work is well-known and loved by sf and fantasy fans. She and her business partner, Jinx Beers, run Fantasies Unlimited, a studio which publishes Alicia's cards, limited-edition prints, and other artwork. In addition to art drawn from fantasy and folklore, Austin is frequently inspired by Western and Native American themes. She was recently the Artist Guest of Honor at the Fantasy Worlds Festival in Berkeley.

Artwork by Alicia Austin

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Gryphon Rider

by Cherith Baldry

They shot Rakhille out from under me, in the battle for the Western Heights. I was lucky to get off with a broken arm, but I took the man who killed her in the throat, with my last crossbow bolt. Now my writing sprawls across the page, because I have to use my left hand.

Back to front as usual, Jannis would say. Very well, then.

The record of Wing-Captain Heleia, Second Squadron of the Gryphon Riders of Robardic, in the tenth year of King Roen's reign, and the fourth year of the war against the Southlands. Is that formal enough for you, Squadron-Captain Jannis?

When I came to myself I was lying in a tent, with a field surgeon and an orderly wrangling over me in the soft accents of the South. Damn Rakhille for plunging down on the wrong side of the lines. Damn her for being dead.

The surgeon did not know what to do with me, for in the Southlands the women do not ride to war. He placed a canvas screen around me to guard my modesty from the eyes of his own soldiers — or, for all I know, to guard their modesty from mine. I told him I was sorry for disturbing his nice, well-ordered field hospital, and he looked at me as if I terrified him.

They had taken away my riding leathers, and when I was fit to sit up they brought me a gown. It was hard to fasten, one-handed. I asked the surgeon for a shirt and breeches, and the poor man went bright scarlet.

The next day they put me in a wagon and took me out of the camp, under escort. No one would tell me where they were taking me. The wagon followed a road that wound up into the hills, jouncing along until my arm hurt like all three hells at once. As the daylight faded we came to this fastness, perched half way up a precipice.

When the cart halted in the courtyard my escort formed up around me and led me through the door to the tower, barred and braced with iron, up a spiral stair and through a small, bare anteroom.

The room beyond was larger, panelled, with a fire smouldering on the hearth. An unkempt lad with a shock of black hair was piling logs on it from a basket. There was a bed, a table and chair, all very plain.

"This is a fortress." The voice spoke behind me. "We have no suitable lodg-

Artwork by Michael Kucharski

ing for ladies."

I turned. My escort had withdrawn, though I could see them kicking their heels in the anteroom. In the doorway stood a man I had never seen before. He was small — not so tall as I — ,with curled golden hair and beringed hands like a courtier. He wore a blue velvet robe, furred at wrists and throat. I could have told him which of us looked more at home in his fortress, even in my borrowed gown.

"I am Aumeril, Lord Warden," he said with a freezing dignity. "You are a prisoner, Lady. If you cooperate you will be treated well, but I fear we have no woman here to attend you."

"I'm no lady." I meant to be pleasant, at least until he gave me reason to be anything else. "A soldier, no more. I'm used to the company of men of honour."

Aumeril's response astounded me. A tide of blood flowed into his face, and drained away, leaving him white. His hands shook. He said nothing, but turned and slammed out of the room.

"What's the matter with him?" I said, to myself, but the boy with the logs turned from the fire, guffawing.

"He were a coward," he said. "He ran from the battlefield. We all knows it here. He thinks you knows it, too."

"You surprise me," I said.

That was true; I was surprised that Aumeril had ever been near a battlefield. I made my voice cold, for I have no stomach for gossip, but servants will do it, discouraged or not. The boy drew close to me, grinning; he had a slack mouth and a pasty, pimpled face.

"You ask me what you wants," he said. "I'll see you right, Lady."

Whether he thought I could pay him, I don't know. I'm not such a fool that I believed he meant kindness. I said sharply, "Go about your duties."

His grin faded. He hunched his shoulders as if I'd struck him, and took himself and his foul breath elsewhere.

When he had shambled out, I examined my prison. The bed was hard, but well supplied with blankets and a fur cover. The floor was bare flagstones. On the table was an earthenware jug of water and a cup, and an earthenware lamp.

Another door led to a privy, and a second out onto a balcony, but that was locked. I pressed my eye to the latticework opening, and saw nothing but clouds barring the sky. Almost I could imagine riding down the air, Rakhille beneath me... no. That way madness lies.

That was yesterday. This morning, Aumeril came back, sat at the table and interrogated me. He was nervous, fiddling with a silver pouncet box on a chain round his neck. I think he realized he had given himself away to me. He had brought paper, pen and ink, to record what I told him.

"My name is Heleia," I said. "Wing Captain of the Second Squadron of Gryphon Riders. That is all I'm obliged to tell you."

Anyone would think that was plain enough, but not Aumeril. We went up and down and round about and back again, over all the questions you would expect: troop movements and numbers and supplies, and where did King Roen plan his next offensive. As if I would know. Or would tell Aumeril if I did. He was patient, I'll give him that. Patient to sheer stupidity, if he thought I would reply to a question the twentieth time he asked it, when I had not replied the first.

He threw the pen down in the end, and I thought he would crumple the sheet of paper, on which he had written nothing but my name and rank, but he controlled himself.

"Lady Heleia..."

"Captain."

"Captain, then. You would be more sensible to answer my questions. It's for you to choose, whether your imprisonment is hard or easy."

I was not sure what he was threatening, or offering. I said — a little pompously, I admit, and twisting the knife in his own wound, but I was heartily sick of him by now — "I fear nothing but the loss of my honour. I desire nothing but to keep it."

He flushed again at that, and stamped out. He left the paper behind him, and so I began this record.

Aumeril reappeared in the evening, while I was eating the meal the black-haired boy — who tells me his name is Erran — brought me. He saw my record, and took the sheets to the lamp to read. That annoyed me, but I concealed it. He would get what he deserved when he read what I had written about him.

I watched him, and saw his face change, but to his credit he kept on to the end. Did he think I was such a fool as to write secrets there? Then he tossed the papers on to the table.

"You may continue, if it amuses you. But do not try to write messages. No one will take them."

I went on spooning soup, as if he had not spoken. I waited until he was at the door, with his hand on the latch, before I said, "I should like hot water to bathe. And the key to the balcony."

"The key?" He gave a spurt of laughter. "You're a prisoner, Lady. Do you think I'm mad?"

"You are mad, if you think I could escape from there. Even a gryphon rider needs a gryphon to fly."

"There are wild gryphons, in these hills."

Now it was my turn to laugh. I was not sure whether he was stupid, or thought I was. A wild gryphon, even a female, grows no bigger than an eagle. And they are wild. Jannis, in one of his crazy fits, took a hatchling and tried to train it to hunt from his wrist like a falcon, but gave it up before he lost a hand.

Then my laughter died. Wild gryphons — just to see them, riding the wind, soaring, gliding, plummeting on each other in mock battle... There are few things more beautiful. But I could not tell that to Aumeril, and anyway, he had gone.

This morning Erran brought hot water. Even with my arm bound up, I managed to bathe and wash my hair. Now if I wore my hair long as ladies do, instead of cropped to go under the flying helmet, I would have hairpins. I do not think the balcony door would resist for long. As it is, I shall need to think of an alternative.

The bedsprings bend very easily.

My midday meal, brought to me by Erran, is always soup, cold meat, and bread. Today I kept the meat, and when I had eaten the rest of the meal I opened the balcony door, went out, and gave the whistle I always used to call Rakhille.

It was some time before they came, but I was well content, breathing fresh air for the first time in days, and looking at something other than the four walls of my room — at air and cloud and plunging rock, and moorland spread out below.

Three of them answered my whistle at last. I had placed some of the meat on the stone parapet, and the wild gryphons flapped and squabbled over it. Another piece I held out in my hand

— well swathed in a napkin — but only one of them dared to stoop and take it.

Oh, but he was beautiful! Bright-eyed, his beak a golden curve, his feathers black with a coppery glint. I've always been ridiculously proud of my hair, because it's that same coppery black, and cropped short it looks a little like feathers. Rakhille was that colour too; that's why I chose her, when she was a hatchling.

With the meat gone, the gryphons flew off, dancing in air. I watched them out of sight, and then turned back into the room. Aumeril was standing there, gazing out — at the gryphons, I realized, not at me. He murmured, "Beautiful..."

I edged past him into the room and closed the balcony door, palming the key. Aumeril said, "Do they always come when you call?"

"I don't know. To tell you the truth, I've not much experience with the wild ones. We train the fighting gryphons to come to a whistle. Perhaps they like it."

He smiled at me. The first time I had seen him smile, or look at all relaxed, or anything but dignified, or defensive, or ill tempered. Something had changed, even when he remembered himself; we had shared something.

He never mentioned the key.

At midday today, on the tray with my meal there lay a glove. A thick, leather glove such as falconers use. It's a great deal easier than a napkin.

I went on feeding the wild gryphons. After a few days, I distinguished about seven or eight different ones. The only one who always came was my little male. I called him Rakhil; I did not name the others.

After that first time, I wondered whether Aumeril would come again, to watch the feeding. For some reason I was disappointed when he did not. In fact, for several days I saw nothing of him at all.

As well as feeding the gryphons, I watched the road from the balcony. It was not as deserted as you might think. Soldiers rode along it, coming or going, usually in twos and threes. Sometimes there were supply wagons. Towards sunset on the sixth day after I first opened the door, a whole baggage train appeared, with a large escort, and I guessed that the garrison was changing.

After supper the same night, Aumeril reappeared.

He looked agitated. He was carrying a bundle, which he held out to me, and then seeing that I would have trouble taking it with one hand, he laid it on the bed.

"Some things you might need, Lady," he said.

I unwrapped it. There was another gown, finer than the one I was wearing, underthings and stockings, handkerchiefs, a comb and a mirror. I was desperate for them, especially the underthings, being sick of rinsing out my own in my bathwater.

Aumeril must have sent for them. I stared at him. He had gone to stand in front of the fire, fiddling about with his pouncet box.

"Thank you, my lord," I said.

"There's news." He spoke hurriedly, as if he was confessing something he was ashamed of. "Your king has retaken the Western Heights. There's battle in the valley."

"Coming here?" I asked.

I felt a quickening. This might mean the end of my imprisonment. But Aumeril shook his head.

"No. Roen is trying to press on downriver to take the port at Stellast. That would open the way to the capital." He shot me a look, half pride, half a queer kind of embarrassment. "Garnil holds the way against him."

We have all heard of Garnil in the North. One of the chief Southern generals, and close kin to their Duke, who would call himself King. I had often wished to meet him, if only because the old saying tells us that next best to a noble friend is a noble enemy.

"Garnil is my cousin," Aumeril said, still in that same hurried, self-conscious way. "I fought in his company. I was with him when —"

He broke off and turned away, a hand pressed to his lips. When he fled from the battle, I supplied silently. For the first time I really thought about that, and for the first time it seemed strange to me. What kind of general would take this fragile little courtier — untrained and inexperienced, if I know anything of war, as I do — put a sword in his hand, and order him to — what? No Northern general would be so irresponsible, or he would find himself arraigned alongside the man who had failed.

And I thought again of Garnil. All the stories told of his courage, dash and daring, none of his judgement. But it takes both to make a commander.

"My lord Aumeril," I said, feeling kinder towards him, "when I first came here, I used an expression that I believe you found offensive. Truly I did not mean to. I am sorry for it."

He did not look at me.

"Garnil sent me here," he said. "It's a — a decent exile. More than I deserve. He said he would visit me, but he does not come. Sometimes I'm afraid he has forgotten, or does not care, or — no." He straightened; his face was still turned away from me. "He has his duties, after all."

He turned back to me then and bowed, all dignity again except for the tears on his face. He said, "I ask your pardon for being tedious," and went out.

I have just read over what I wrote yesterday. I still do not understand what demon drove Aumeril to come and confide in me. Surely he did not expect comfort from a gryphon rider?

Yet he might find more, perhaps, than from his own people. In the North we do not despise anyone, man or woman, who chooses not to be a warrior, knowing they have no aptitude, or preferring to give their life to some art or craft or the teaching of their children. Here in the South, the men must take up the sword as the women must sit over their stitchery, and none of them, as far as I can see, is one jot the better for it.

I have had time to think, too, of the news of the war Aumeril gave me. It is a great thing that we have retaken the Western Heights. Who controls the Heights, controls the South, for the main road runs through the pass, and supplies must come that way, or go by sea. If Roen takes the port at Stellast, the war is all but over.

Meantime I sit and moulder here. I should like to take some part in it before the last.

My arm has healed enough for the bandages to come off, though it aches if I use it overmuch, so the reader of this record must make do with my left-handed scrawl still. My hair has grown; it covers my ears now. I thought of asking for scissors, but what point? I do not need to wear the flying helmet. I've heard that some of the Southern ladies grow their hair long enough to sit on. Will they keep me here until I can sit on mine? But long before that I should be screaming mad.

The gryphons still come to be fed on the balcony. More of them now. The year draws to its end, and wild prey will be harder to find. My little Rakhil comes to my call.

Aumeril has never been to see them since that first time. But someone sends a bowl of raw meat scraps with my meal each day.

Yesterday, towards evening, I saw a band of soldiers riding up from the valley. A tight little band, brisk and disciplined. Their weapons glinted in the dying sunlight, and a scarlet pennon fluttered in the wind.

I was expecting Erran with my supper tray, but instead he sidled in empty-handed, with a knowing grin on his face.

"Lord Aumeril, he says you're to put on your fine gown and come down to the dining hall for supper."

I was astonished. In all the weeks I'd been here, I'd never set foot beyond the door that led to the rest of the fortress. I could see no reason for Aumeril to allow it now, unless it was somehow connected with the soldiers who had arrived earlier.

It was. When I had changed my gown, Erran brought me to the dining room. It was a panelled room like my own, but larger, with a huge fireplace, and a shield on the wall above it, blazing scarlet and gold. Two men stood before the fire.

One was Aumeril. The other, tall and dark and lean, stepped forward as I came in, bent over my hand, and kissed it. "Lady Heleia, I am honoured," he said.

"I am Captain Heleia of the Gryphon Riders."

To tell the truth, I was thrown a little off balance. I am a warrior, no Southern lady to be pleased with kisses and compliments. The dark man smiled, bowing; he was superbly handsome. Aumeril said, "This is my cousin, General Garnil."

I had already guessed. Aumeril looked more alive than I had ever seen him, and there was a kind of challenge in his eyes, as if he would have said, "You see? He came after all!"

"Then I too am honoured," I said.

We went to table. I enjoyed the meal, which was a change from the dull fare Erran brought to my room, and the first wine I had drunk since my capture. But I did not enjoy it so much that I drank enough to fuddle my wits.

General Garnil was pleased to be fascinated by the Gryphon Riders, and asked me many questions about them. At first it was innocent enough, about breeding and training, and how the riders are chosen. As the meal went on, however, his questions became more pointed, and I knew we were back to the old game: what did I know that would be useful to him?

For a while I played the game, fencing with him, parrying his questions, but soon I wearied of it. Did he think I was so foolish that I would be dazzled by a handsome face and a few compliments, enough to trade my honour for them? I took a last sip of wine, and said, "Your pardon, my lords. I grow tired. I will leave you for tonight."

They both rose as I did, bowed, and wished me good night, but I guessed from the flash in Garnil's eyes that I had not pleased him. I left, not waiting for an escort to take me back upstairs.

Outside the door I lingered. I wondered whether they might say anything worth my hearing. The first voice was Aumeril's, but so low that I could not make out the words. All through the meal he had said little, and eaten less, keeping his eyes fixed on Garnil. He did not trouble to hide his admiration.

I heard Garnil's laughter; it sounded angry. He said, "I must ride tomorrow."

Aumeril said, "Take me with you."

A pause. I imagined Garnil's refusal, because the next voice was Aumeril again, pleading.

"Let me ride with you. Give me a chance to prove myself."

"You had your chance." The voice cold, cruel. "You failed, and I found

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this charge for you. Can't you even bear that faithfully? Or are you afraid of one woman?"

A longer silence now. I stood in the passage, at the foot of the stairs. The dining room door was still open a crack. I edged it open further. I knew I was a fool. What would Garnil do if he found me? And why should I care in any case whether he took Aumeril with him or not?

They had left the table and stood by the fire again. Aumeril reached out to his cousin. "Please. I cannot bear it."

"No."

"Then — then will you promise me something?"

Garnil said nothing, and there was nothing encouraging in his silence. Aumeril's voice was shaking as he went on again.

"If they break through — the Northerners — they'll overrun all this tract of country. What will they do to us here? Especially when they find we have one of their gryphon riders. Promise that you won't let us be cut off. Promise that you won't leave me here."

Garnil looked down at him, mouth curling in cold contempt. If he had turned such a face on me, I would have sprung for his throat. Aumeril just sank his head into his hands.

The General went on looking at him for a long time. Gradually his expression changed to a weary disgust. He said at last, "Very well. I promise I will come for you."

When I went back to my room, I lit the lamp and began to write this record. Before I had set down more than a few lines, I was interrupted by voices in the anteroom. The door opened. Garnil was standing there.

I rose and started to speak. But Garnil had not come to talk. He strode across the room to me, took me by the shoulders, and brought his mouth down on mine.

For a few seconds I did nothing, and I swear it was not passion, but outrage, that kept me pliant. Because I was a woman, and his prisoner, did he think I was available? Or did he really have such a good opinion of himself that he thought he might come at my secrets another way?

I thrust him off. He took a step back, watching me. He was not displeased. A smile touched his mouth. "Oh, yes, Lady," he breathed out. "Don't give in too easily. Where would be the fun in that?"

I met his eyes. Southern ladies scream, I suppose. Perhaps because I did not scream he thought I welcomed him.

"Please me," he said, "and who knows? I could have you exchanged. Freedom. In a few days, Lady, you could be riding a gryphon again."

He had read me well enough. I might have been tempted to yield for that bribe, if I had believed him. As it was, his ignorance helped me to keep my balance. If I ever ride another gryphon, it will be at the price of long and rigorous training. Gryphon and rider pair for life.

He was smiling still. He stepped forward, and I raked a hand across his face. The hand is now softer than when I held reins each day, but the fingernails are longer. I drew blood.

Garnil stepped backwards, his breath coming hard, his smile gone. He touched his scratches and looked at the blood smeared on his fingertips. "Vicious bitch," he said. "You've been stuck in here for weeks, you must be panting for it. What's the matter with you? Or is it true that the gryphon riders neuter their women?"

I took no notice of the insult. For a minute I thought he would come at me again. I hoped he would; I relished the thought of doing him an injury that he might have trouble explaining to the next trollop he bedded. I was not afraid. He could have called the guards, of course, and overpowered me that way, but I knew a man like Garnil would never admit that he could not handle one woman. I waited, until he spat out an obscenity I will not write, and went out.

I had not found it neces-

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sary to speak to him. When he had gone, I sat down and went on writing this record.

I slept late this morning. Perhaps the wine had affected me. When I woke, the prison walls seemed to confine me more than ever they did. I unfastened the balcony door and went out.

It was a raw day. The year was drawing to its end. With the first snows, the war would dwindle into a long progression of sieges, winter quarters, and disarray. Roen would have to make his push soon, or lose his advantage.

The moorland was empty. Nothing moved on the road. I wondered if Garnil had already left, or if he intended giving me the honour of another visit.

When the door opened, I thought it was Erran with my tray. I said, "Put it on the table."

Movement in the room behind me. Then Aumeril's voice. "Lady..."

I stepped back into the room. He looked ill, his face white and pinched.

"Garnil has gone?" I said.

He nodded.

"Lady, he told me..." He was twisting his hands together in anguish. "He told me to have you tortured."

He could barely force the confession out. I was not even surprised.

"And will you?" I said.

He shook his head.

"I cannot. Not even to give the order." He made a helpless gesture. "I have been shamed enough. What can I do to make it worse?"

He fell silent. I thought he was not far away from tears. Certainly he did not know how to get himself out of the room again.

I brought the falconer's glove and gave it to him.

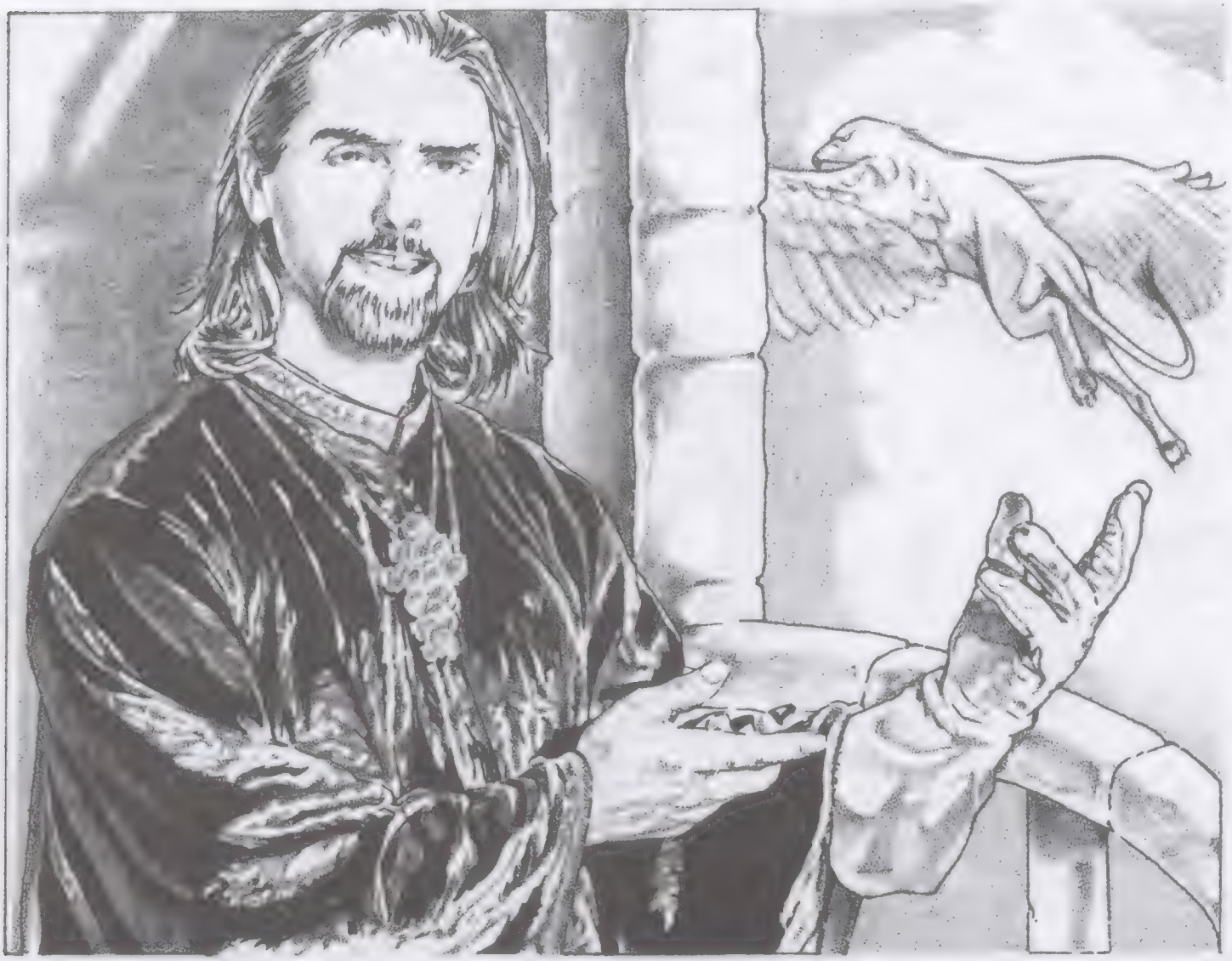
"Put that on, my lord," I said. "Let me show you."

Wonderingly, he did as I said. He had brought the bowl of scraps as usual. I carried it out on to the balcony, pushing him in front of me. I gave the whistle that would summon the gryphons.

They were greedier than ever, these days, half starved on winter's scant pickings. After only a few minutes, the air around us was filled with a chaos of wings.

I showed Aumeril how to hold out the meat, on the palm of the gloved hand. He was nervous, half inclined to flinch, yet still in thrall to the wonder of it. I felt a pang, I admit, to see my Rakhil stoop to his hand, but I looked at Aumeril's face instead. It was exalted, transformed. I saw a shadow, at least, of what he might have become if he had ever been allowed to be happy.

When the scraps were all finished, Aumeril watched regretfully as the gryphons soared away, until all the fierce brightness of them vanished into the sky. The light was still in his face as



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he stepped back into the room.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Such a precious gift..."

He stripped off the glove and seemed as if he would offer me his hand, only realizing at the last moment that I would not wish to take it. He held out the glove instead. Hesitantly, with a queer formality, he said, "I would call you friend, Lady, if I did not know that would be distasteful to you. But I will stand your friend here, as far as I can."

He bowed awkwardly, the courtier's grace gone, and left. I put little trust in his offer of friendship, and yet, strangely, I do not find it distasteful.

Today I saw the distant hills darkened by a great gathering of birds. And in the evening, the sky smudged with smoke. The wild gryphons did not come when I whistled, not even Rakhil. He was not tame; I never wanted him tame.

Last night my dreams were filled with shouting and banging and the galloping of horses. This morning, instead of Erran with my breakfast tray, there came a hurried knocking on my door, and the sound of the key. I sat up in bed, pulling the blanket around my shoulders as Aumeril all but fell into the room. He looked wild and dishevelled; he was gasping for breath, and he had a purpling bruise on one temple.

"Lady..." he said. He was clutching the back of my chair for support. "Word came in the night. There was battle on the plain before Stellast. Your king has won. It is over."

I rejoiced to hear his news, but it was no more than I had expected.

"Sit, my lord," I said. "Are you hurt? What happened?"

He slid into the chair and supported his head on one hand.

"Your people are marching into these hills," he said. "The soldiers fled when they heard it. I tried to stop them..." He fingered the bruise, and winced.

"You stayed," I said.

That was more tenacity than I would have expected from him. His head went up.

"Garnil said he would come."

He spoke defensively, and I could tell he did not really believe it. After a moment, in a lower voice, he said,

"The messenger told me, Garnil was riding to the capital, to take part in the peace talks. But... he must have been mistaken." The defensive note again. "Garnil would not break his word."

Lord Aumeril has left my door open and I have the freedom of the citadel. In truth, I am free to go, but there are no horses left, and last night the snow began. It still falls heavily.

Aumeril and I eat together in the kitchen. There are stores enough to feed the two of us for months.

No one has come.

Aumeril scarcely speaks. He looks ill. I do not think he sleeps. Four days now since the battle, and not even he can believe any longer that Garnil will keep his word.

After I began today's record, I went down to the kitchen to prepare our midday meal. I am no cook, but I can throw salt pork and beans into a pot, and Aumeril does not complain.

When the pot was bubbling on the fire I went back to my room. I did not see Aumeril at first, until wind banged open the balcony door, driving a swirl of snow into the room. Then I realized he stood outside on the balcony.

I went out to him. Snow stung my face and eyes. He stood gripping the parapet, leaning over, staring down into the boiling snow. I grabbed his arm.

"What are you doing?"

He pulled away from me. For a second I thought he would leap over; I would not have stopped him. But he shrank back and sank to his knees.

"I can't!" He was sobbing. "It's the only way — I've nowhere to go, and Garnil won't come — but I can't..."

I pulled him to his feet and guided him back inside. He stood shivering, his velvet robe sodden with melting snow, his hair streaming. I took out the belt knife I have carried ever since word came of the battle.

"Do you want me to help you?" I said.

His eyes widened.

"No — oh, no. Please, don't..."

As I sheathed the knife he began to weep again.

I stripped off his robe and put him into my bed. He sleeps there now, whimpering a little, as if his dreams are evil.

I have seen the gryphon riders over the hills. The ground troops will be here, tomorrow or the next day. When they come, they will question Aumeril, and he will tell them what he knows, such as it is. And he will bear for ever the name of traitor along with the name of coward.

And yet the man who betrayed him, who would have betrayed me if I had trusted him, goes free. And when the war is over and the treaties are signed, he will no doubt be named by both sides as a hero.

So ends the record of Wing-Captain Heleia, second squadron of the gryphon riders of Robardic, as my imprisonment ends. When it began, I thought I could recognize the face of honour. Can anyone — can you, Squadron-Captain Jannis — tell me what it looks like now?

❄

Cherith Baldry was born in Lancaster, England, and studied English at Manchester University and at Oxford. She has been a teacher, but currently writes full-time. She writes primarily for children, but her first love remains fantasy and science fiction. She is married and has two sons.

Michael Kucharski illustrates frequently for these pages and seems to enjoy drawing fantastical beasts of all kinds. He lives near Detroit, Michigan, and has worked as a graphic artist and illustrator since the mid-seventies.

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Three Nights Penance 'til Lakkas Day

by Janna Silverstein

Artwork by Allison Hershey

Marlin had never seen so many fairies in one place before. There were four by the base of the great oak tree. Two of them were pulling up tallisroot and handing it to the other two hovering nearby. All worked in the morning shadows, the sound of their wings ringing in the air like a chorus of tiny bells. The most Marlin had ever seen was two, zipping along like dragonflies over Willow Pond last spring.

He took a few steps away quietly but tripped and fell backward, landing on his rump. The fairies looked his way almost as one, and all of them began to sink slowly in the air. They were staring at him, the singing of their wings descending in pitch. Marlin looked at one of them, and could see the finest details: the turtlelike mottling on its slim little body, the delicate string that caught back its long, sandy hair, and the tiny, looped braid of woven grass that hung from its neck. Its gossamer wings were a blur behind it.

Then the fairies buzzed away. Marlin closed his eyes, crossed his fingers, and quickly uttered the warding rhyme he remembered from childhood: "Three nights' bad luck from the fairy folk / Three nights wearing the geas yoke / Three nights' sorrow in the cow's bad hay / Three nights' penance 'til Lakkas

Day." He opened his eyes. Nothing bad happened in the moments afterward. He got up, brushing himself off and feeling a little foolish.

As he was about to continue his search for herbs, he heard a voice from behind and nearly jumped out of his skin.

"You're supposed to be more careful than that, lockless."

It was Rassel. Marlin didn't know whether to be annoyed or embarrassed or a little bit of both. Calming himself with a deep breath, he turned to face his older brother. Rassel stood two armspans away, leaning against a tree, his arms folded, one foot crossed in front of the other, his plain homespun clothes straining against the muscles he'd been building working at Biddle's mill. Rassel had been four summers old when Marlin was born, and had watched two baby sisters go to the sunset lands before this younger brother had come along. Now, at sixteen summers, he was over a head taller than Marlin, just as he'd always been, but his shoulders were broader. His face was still boyish, but his hands were strong. Where Rassel wore his dark locks long and tied back with a thong like most of the unmarried men in the village, their mother May insisted that Marlin keep his hair short like a child. Rassel never let him forget it.

"You're not supposed to let them see you. You're not supposed to see them, for that matter. You're supposed to go about your business and let them do theirs."

"Oh, shut up," Marlin said and started to walk toward the oak to see if there was any tallisroot left. Rassel's hand on his shoulder halted him.

"Don't do it. That's *their* harvest ground; leave it to them."

"Since when do *you* care what I do? Leave me alone!" Marlin twisted away and took another couple of steps.

"You can't defend yourself against them. You don't have the power to do it and you could get hurt."

There he went, throwing it in Marlin's face again. No magic ... or at least, not yet. Rassel's talent was two years old now: the ability to close his eyes and feel for magic around him, to keep himself safe from the things in the woods and from the mysteries of the otherworlds. As long as the power didn't appear in Marlin, he was the odd one out in their cottage, the helpless one. Rassel had never wanted magic; Marlin always had.

Marlin looked back at his brother. "Mother's never stopped me from coming into the woods. She doesn't think I'll get hurt. I can take care of myself without magic. What's it to you?"

"You just never know what they're going to do," Rassel said a little less belligerently, "and you can't even cast a protection balm ...."

"Like you can," Marlin shot back. "Don't talk like you're a mastermage, Rass. You're just like Mother, and you'll never be anything more ...."

Rassel took a step closer then, and without thinking Marlin took a step back. "You don't know what you're talking about ...."

"Yeah, right." Marlin started deeper into the woods, and this time he kept walking. He could feel his brother's gaze on his back; he waited for Rassel to grab him there, to pull him around and hit him ... but it didn't happen.

"Do you want to see one up close?"

Marlin turned and looked at Rassel.

"What do you mean?" he asked, trying to keep a rein on his skepticism.

"Well, I don't mean anything like that box of twigs you made last summer," Rassel replied.

The summer before had been unnatural. The heat killed five cows at the surrounding farms and burned away much of the crop before May was able to help Darmin, another local mage, summon rain. Because the heat was so dangerous most folks stayed indoors and kept themselves out of the sun. There was talk that some nearby farmer had angered a mastermage, but everyone knew mastermages were nothing more than travelers' tales. There had been other stories, too, some directed at Rassel out of jealousy, May had insisted. To occupy himself during those long, sweltering days, Marlin constructed a box made of string and twigs, about the size of a loaf of bread, and used it to try to capture fairies. It was his secret until Rassel caught him at it and threw the thing into the lake.

"Well, what *do* you mean?" Marlin asked.

"I can spellbind one for you. I can make it so a fairy won't be able to fly away, then you can look at it. You can get your fill and then maybe you'll leave them alone."

"I don't go looking for them, you know."

"Maybe not, but that doesn't stop you from watching them when you find them. So are you interested or not?" Rass set his hands on his hips and waited. Marlin was suspicious. He didn't know why, but something felt wrong about this. Could his brother really do something like that? It sounded like another travelers' tale.

There was really no question about it: he had to find out.

"Yes," he said finally.

"Good. Later this afternoon at the pond." Rassel started away.

"Don't you have to be at the mill?" Marlin called. Rass looked back for a moment.

"No. Biddle said she won't need me until Lakkas Day, so I have three days to do whatever I please."

"Does Mother know?"

"No, she doesn't — and she won't, unless you don't want to see some fairies up close ...."

The sky had gone cloudy by the time Marlin followed Rassel to the edge of Willow Pond. Breezes stirred the woods and pushed through the fabric of Marlin's tunic. Sniffing the air, he knew that later on it would rain.

The spot that Rassel led him to had been a favorite of theirs growing up. When Marlin was younger, Rass taught him to climb trees only paces away from where they now sat. The forest grew close to the shore, and there was one old tree with big branches that reached out toward the middle where the pond was deep. One sun-drenched day years ago, it was Rass who showed him how to climb the tree and then leap from the biggest branch into the water. It was Rass who showed him how to peek into birds' nests without disturbing chicks, and who revealed the grotto there where fairies went to lay their eggs. It was their long-gone father Khir who taught them both how to swim, years before that. But things change. Now the pond was for washing, fishing, and nothing more.

Rass and Marlin sat cross-legged on the damp, grass-patched soil, watching for fairies. Of course, Marlin thought this was a ridiculous idea. In all his life, he'd never found fairies by looking for them or waiting for them; he'd always stumbled upon them as he wandered alone, working for his mother picking armrill and bay. Still, Rass insisted that if they were going to be successful, he had to go about finding fairies *his* way. With nothing else to do, Marlin pulled up pinches of grass

and shredded them to bits, making impatient sounds.

"Rass?"

"Be quiet, Marlin."

He didn't say anything for a moment, then asked, "What does it feel like, Rass, to have magic ...?"

"You'll find out," Rass interrupted him, "if it happens to you." He paused. "Maybe you shouldn't want it to. It's a big responsibility, having magic. You can't just go around waving your hands and casting spells to impress people."

"But I'm not asking ..."

Rass had been staring out across the water, but now he turned to his younger brother. "*Will* you be quiet? If you don't shut up, we won't see any fairies at all."

As the sun began to set, the water began to darken and the green-smelling air began to cool with the evening's approach, the tell-tale singing of fairy wings became clear. Ten paces away, the shimmering creatures hovered by a bush, chasing each other around in circles, swooping and flying, as if they were teasing each other like children. Marlin put his hand on Rass's leg to draw his brother's attention. When Marlin turned his gaze from the fairies to his brother, Rass's eyes were closed and his lips were pursed. Rass looked flushed, as if he had a fever, and Marlin could feel the air around him becoming warm, smelling like a new-set fire. Marlin wanted to urge his brother to hurry, afraid that the fairies might fly away, but in the stillness he couldn't bring himself to say a word. The only sounds now were the gentle breaking of the water on the shore, the rustling of leaves and the high sound of fairy music. Slowly, Rassel raised his left arm and pointed toward the little creatures. Rass's leg became so hot that Marlin pulled his hand away.

Then, for just a moment, Rassel's hand sparkled with an orange light. At the same time, the smoky smell of the air intensified and the tone of the fairy wings seemed to moan, descending in pitch like a minstrel's pipe weeping.

The fairies were close to the ground, moving in fits and starts away from where they'd been.

"Come on," Rassel said as he stood. It took Marlin a moment to scramble to his feet and catch up with his older brother, who was almost upon the fairies. As he came astride, Rass put out one hand. "Stay behind me." Marlin whined with frustration.

"Why didn't it work?" Rass mumbled to himself. "It's *supposed* to work that way."

"What ..." Marlin began, but he could see the fairies clearly now. One was pulling the other along. The second fairy seemed to be having difficulty; one of its wings drooped piteously while the other batted furiously at the air. As they drew even closer, Marlin could hear not only a glassy whine but a high keening as well. It was a small sound so filled with pain that Marlin's eyes burned with sympathetic tears.

"Rass, what's wrong with it?"

Rassel was peering at the pair. "I think I've hurt it," he said. The two fairies were looking at them; the healthy one spat like a cat. Marlin started and his heart skipped a beat. He'd never seen a fairy do that before. The injured fairy began to sink even farther toward the ground, its weeping becoming weaker and yet more desperate. "Oh, the gods! This is all wrong! We've got to leave." Rassel sounded panicked.

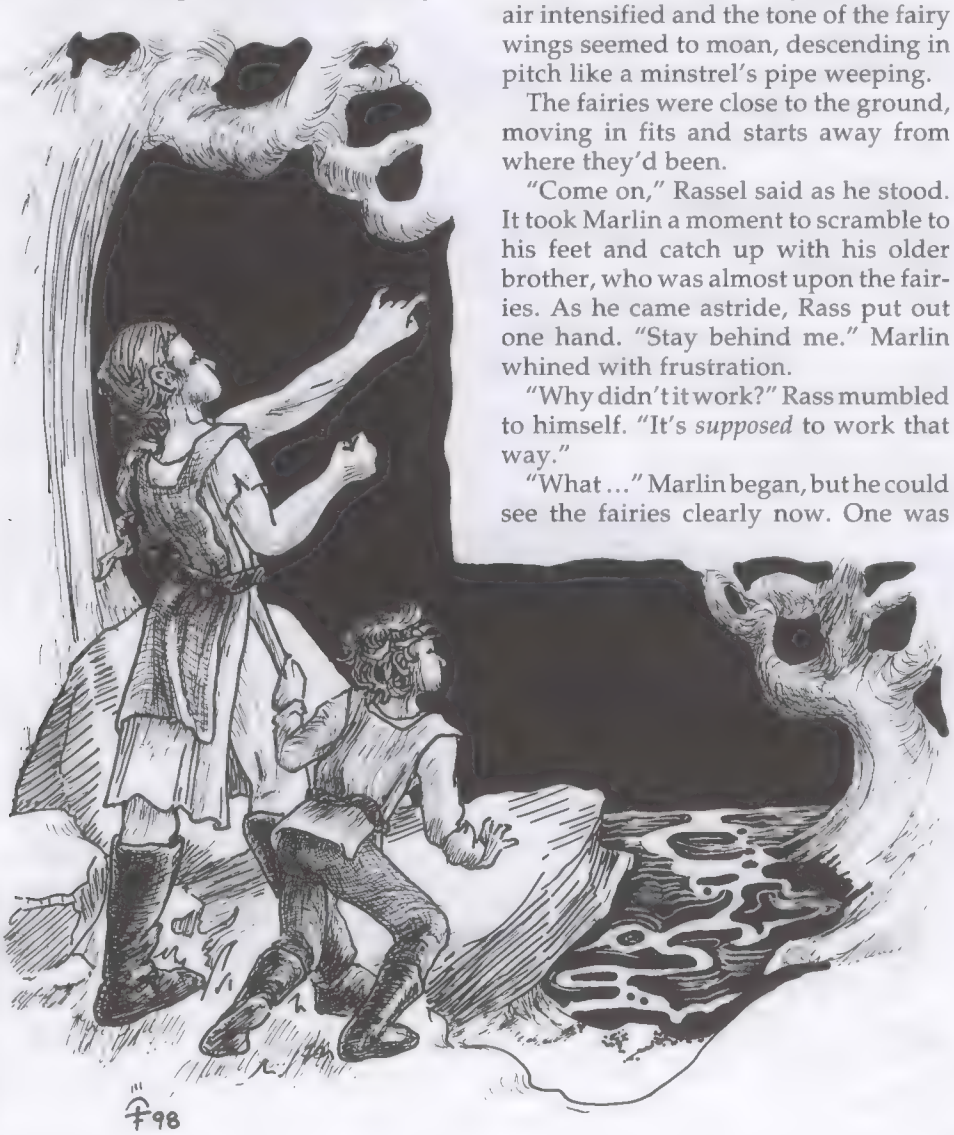
"Leave? Now? But if something's wrong, we should do ..."

Rass grabbed his wrist.

"Nothing. We should do nothing except leave. Come on!" Rass pulled so hard that he pinched Marlin's skin.

"Ow!"

"Come *on!*" Rass yelled. He wrenched Marlin's wrist and they ran.



Artwork by Allison Hershey

By the time they reached the cottage it was dark and starting to rain. They skidded to a halt before the stone path that lead to the door.

"Don't say a *word*," Rass said, looking down at Marlin very seriously.

"But Rass, if we did something wrong Mother should know. She might be able to help."

"Say *nothing*, Marlin. Just ... act normal." Rassel walked the path without another word. Marlin thought he braced his shoulders before he opened the door.

"Rassel, there you are. Have you seen your brother?" Marlin could hear their mother say.

As Marlin entered the cottage, Rassel replied, "He's right behind me. I ran into him on the way home."

In the light from the hearth and two candles, May was working her mortar and pestle, using her four-fingered hand to do the grinding. Her light brown hair was tucked back in a rough kerchief, one lock hanging loose over her forehead. Her gray eyes had little lines around them, and Marlin noticed for the first time that her neck had tiny lines here and there as well. Her apron was smeared with green.

"You're both probably wet. Come

here by the fire and warm up." Then her nose twitched and she looked at Rassel. "What's that I smell?" she asked.

"Nothing," Rassel said. He opened the door to the cellar and grabbed a small keg to carry down.

"I know that smell, Rassel. What have you been up to? Marlin?" She began to turn.

Marlin headed for the ladder to the attic and took the rungs as quickly as he could. He was still out of breath from the run, still shaking from the shock of the fairy spitting at them and of Rassel's obvious anxiety. He dropped to the hay and wrapped himself in his blanket, curling up in one corner of the attic where he could hear the goings-on below. He tried to still his trembling hands. His wrist hurt from Rassel's rough treatment. His heart was hammering painfully. Something had gone wrong; he wished he understood what it was. That's when he remembered that he'd forgotten to recite the guarding rhyme.

"Rassel!" His mother's voice penetrated the boards and the hay. "What's happened? ... Oh no you don't. You're going to sit down here now and tell me what you've done." Marlin could just imagine his brother trying to grab another keg for the cellar.

"Nothing happened. I just had to coax a thorn out of Marlin's palm. You know how it is when you're looking for tallisroot. You've got to pick through all this thorny stuff to find it."

"You don't smell like you were doing healing. You've got a nastier scent about you, young man."

"Well, maybe it's just the smell of sweat, Mother." Rassel sounded defiant. Marlin knew his brother well enough to recognize the sound of bravado. Marlin grudgingly admired him for it, despite his misgivings about the lie his brother had just told. "It's hard working at the mill and I'm going to come home sometimes smelling like the common workman I am."

By the sound of the thumping that followed, Marlin knew Rassel was climbing the ladder, coming up to the attic. Marlin moved back to his usual sleeping spot and sat cross-legged as his brother emerged from below.

"Well, that went badly," Rassel said, sitting down on his own bedclothes. "I shouldn't have snapped that way." He dropped his head to his hands.

"You think she knows?" Marlin asked, still not sure exactly what it was she would know, hoping to find out.

"If she doesn't, she'll know soon. Leave me alone, lockless." Rassel lay down and curled up on one side, his back toward his younger brother.

"I want to know what just happened. What was *supposed* to happen?" When Rassel didn't answer, Marlin reached out and gave his brother a shove in the shoulder. "I have a right to know."

Rassel rolled over and grabbed Marlin's wrist so fast that Marlin didn't have a chance to pull back. Rassel's grip was strong and painful — he was holding the same arm he'd wrenched earlier — and he pushed Marlin back to the floor. Rass pulled back a moment, kneeling, then bent over his brother, resting each hand on the floor to either side of Marlin's head. He looked wild. The rain was a regular pattering on the roof above them.

"You want to know what happened? I'll tell you what happened." His tone was menacing. "You spend all day tromping around in the woods, dreaming and watching fairies and feeling sorry for yourself. You don't have magic and you whine and mope about it. You act like you're entitled to it. Who do you think you are, Marlin? Until Mother and Father came here, everyone in the village thought magic was a myth ...."

"What about Darmin?" Marlin interrupted.

"*Darmin?* Darmin was a hermit. The villagers never really believed he existed. Mother only knew him because she could smell his magicworking and went looking for him. And now that he's gone, they figure she made him up." Rassel paused, sat back, and then spoke a little more thoughtfully. "People accept Mother because she's a healer. But they look at me like I'm a monster because I'm still learning; everyone thinks something awful will happen if I make a mistake. Last year there was talk that I caused the heat wave by trying to start a campfire."

Rassel's voice intensified again. "And do you know why Biddle doesn't want to see me until Lakkas Day? Because she thinks I cursed her business. She thinks that having me around is bad luck. And she's right." *Blast it*, Marlin thought. *Three nights penance 'til Lakkas Day .... Biddle really believes in that old rhyme.*

"I thought that if I could bind a fairy for you, you'd stop mooning after them," Rassel said. "But spellbinding is a myth, Marlin, just like mastermages, giants, and winged horses that fly by night. The stories Father used to tell about making his overlord disappear to escape from danger or making fish fall from the sky: they were nothing but travelers' tales. When Mother found me making mice dance out back, she began to teach me because she said it was more dangerous for me to be untrained than to know what I was doing. But what do I know? No one can really

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do the things Father used to talk about. I tried because of you. And I botched it. I let the fairies get away.

"And now there's going to be a swarm, Marlin. Do you know what that is?"

Marlin shook his head. Rassel rested each of his hands on Marlin's shoulders and leaned. He was heavy and Marlin couldn't move. He was also angry, and Marlin wasn't sure he understood why. Most of all he thought that Rassel was going to hit him and wished he'd just do it.

"A swarm is when a flock of fairies get whipped up into a frenzy. They'll rip a man to bits with their hands and teeth. And that's when their singing is the sweetest."

"That's just a story," Marlin said.

"That's what happened to Father."

Marlin's heart skipped a beat and it felt like a knife through his chest. Rassel glared at Marlin and then got up. He walked across the room until the roof was too low to allow him to stand upright and stopped.

"I asked Father to catch me a fairy and he tried. They came at him so fast, he never even knew what was happening. I ran away to get help but it was too late.

"Biddle and the others found the remains at Willow Pond," Rassel said quietly. Marlin could just hear him over the rain. "They had to look twice, and when they finally found what had happened, the only way they knew for sure that it was him was his blue bead. And his hair. They found his braid at the water's edge. There were leaves torn from the bushes, branches everywhere, and wings all over the place.

"It was my fault, Marlin. I made him bother the fairies that day.

"I wanted to stop the same from happening to you."

Marlin touched the bead he wore at his neck. It had to be a story. He'd never seen this braid that Rassel spoke of. It was kind of thing his mother would have kept and shown him. The braid was the symbol of their marriage; all married men wore their hair plaited. May had kept Rassel's first curls, and the first pot Marlin had ever thrown. Where was this piece of history?

"You're lying." He got up, as angry as he'd ever been. "Mother told me that Da left his bead for me."

"Mother didn't tell you because she thought you'd never go into the forest again. But you *have* to live here, because the town folk won't have you — they barely tolerate me — and she didn't want you turning into Darmin." Marlin stared at his brother, not understanding. "The fairies only show themselves to people who have magic, Marlin. You'll have it. If we live through the night."

Marlin's breath caught. He had magic after all?

"What do you mean?" May was standing on the ladder, waist-high through the door into the attic. "What have you done, Rassel?"

That's when they heard it, a high, sweet, unearthly ringing over the patter of the rain on the thatch. It was growing louder. May's eyes widened with surprise and fear. "What have you done?"

"We've got to get down to the cellar," Rassel said. He got up and pulled Marlin with him.

"Is that fairies I hear?" his mother

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asked as she backed down the ladder.

"There's no time, Mother. Hurry!" Rassel pushed Marlin to go down the ladder after May.

The sound of fairy wings was getting louder as Marlin descended after his mother. When he got to the kitchen, he found May pulling open the door to the cellar with its rope-loop handle.

"You're going to explain this when we get down there, Rassel," she said as she descended into the darkness. "Marlin, bring a candle and the flint and steel," she snapped. Marlin reached for one of the candles on the table and found himself being pushed toward the door in the floor.

"Not now. Come on!" Rassel commanded.

Marlin took the ladder quickly; Rassel was just above him. As Marlin reached the floor, Rassel pulled the door shut. The room was sealed into darkness.

"Curse it, there's no latch!" Rassel said. The sound of wings like cascades of sharp, broken glass suddenly swelled above them. "Mother, is the broom down here?"

"No," she responded. "There must be something else we can use."

Marlin got down on his hands and knees and felt around. He knew what Rassel and his mother had in mind: if they could slip some sort of stick through the rope loop in the door, it would help keep the door shut; if the fairy swarm got into the house they wouldn't be able to get down into the cellar. Based on the whining song above them, the swarm had not only arrived, but gotten into the house and was massing just above. He brushed against his mother's skirts. She jumped and cried out.

"It's me, Mother," Marlin said, and turned around. If he had his bearings right, he was crawling toward the corner where they stored vegetables in covered baskets.

"Marlin, can you find the basket with the carrots in it? A couple of carrots might do until we can find something stronger," his mother said. It was just what Marlin had been thinking. He reached the baskets and fumbled in the dark, trying to unlatch and open each one, feeling inside each. He heard his mother doing the same off to his left.

"Rassel, are you all right?" she asked.

"Fine." His brother's voice sounded a little less panicked. "They don't seem to be at the door, but I can hear them just above."

They heard a crash, something large hitting the floor. May made an unhappy sound.

Finally one basket had what Marlin was looking for. He could feel the long, stiff roots and grabbed a couple of stout, solid ones. "Got it!" He felt his way through the dark to the foot of the ladder and reached up to feel for his brother's foot.

Rassel cried out and began to kick at his hand.

"Rassel, it's me! Here!" He knocked his brother's leg with the carrots, only letting go when he was sure Rassel had them.

"Done!" Rassel said. He sounded relieved. Marlin moved away from the base of the ladder. His brother was descending.

"Shouldn't you stay up there, Rass?" Marlin asked. "What if they don't hold?"

"I don't think the fairies are going to be able to pry open that door."

Rassel settled down on the packed earthen floor next to Marlin, but May's voice came from above them.

"This is your work, Rassel. I don't care how it happened, but it means you were using magic in ways that you shouldn't have. I should have known this would happen. You're just like your father. And here we are, trapped. How could you have been so irresponsible?"

Marlin's breath caught; everything fell into place. Rassel had been telling the truth about their father and mother after all: fairies and magic, lies upon lies. And he remembered his brother's words from even earlier that day: *It's a big responsibility, having magic. You can't just go around waving your hands and casting spells to impress people.*

And yet, that's exactly what Rassel had done.

The door began to clatter above them. It sounded as though someone was pulling at the loop, rattling the door against the carrots.

"Those won't hold," Marlin heard his mother say. He got to his feet and felt his brother do the same. He heard May climb the ladder. The sound of the rattling changed. He assumed it was because she'd grabbed the rope loop in the door and was holding it firm.

"Cast a protection, Rassel!" May yelled.

"Mother...?"

"I can't do both at once, Rassel. Do it now! *Try!*" She sounded terrified. Marlin wished he could see what was happening. He heard the rhythm of his brother's breathing change. The moist scent of the earth around them intensified.

"Rassel ... !" May cried out. Marlin was struck by something hard. He deflected it and realized that it was the ladder his mother had been standing upon. She must have lost her balance trying to keep the door closed.

"Mother?" he called.

"I'm all right, but I can't hold on much longer." She was hanging from the loop. Marlin heard more fumbling in the darkness.

"I've got you, Ma," Rassel said.

"Ow! Ah ... ah ..." Sounds of pain.

"Mother?" Marlin asked.

"They're pulling on the rope ... My fingers ..."

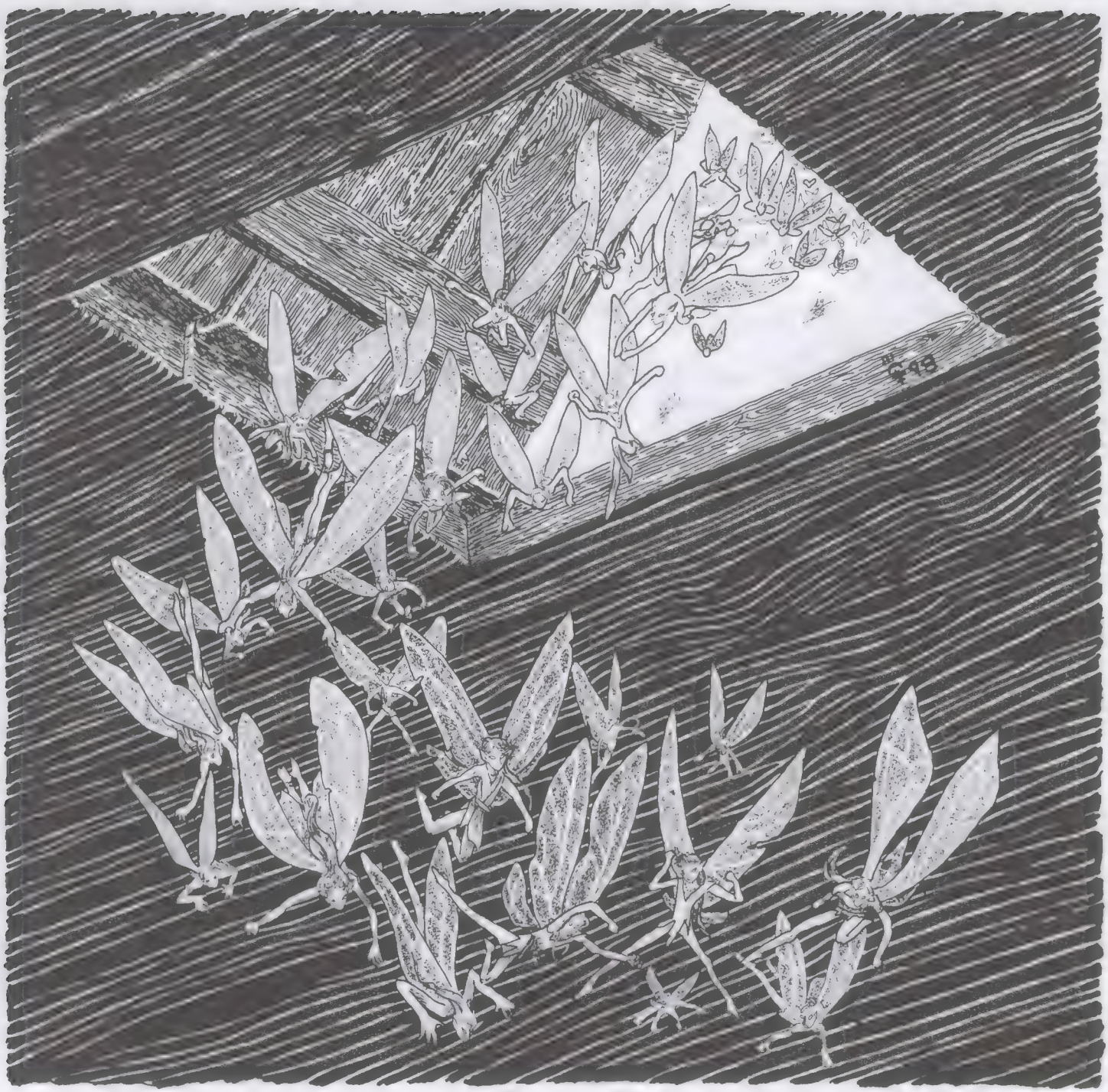
The door flew open. As light from the hearth poured in, Marlin saw his mother fall from the bracing hold Rassel had on her legs. A cloud of fairies swarmed above in the firelight in a menacing burst of loud new ringing. May hit the ground, unconscious. Her hands were bloody and rope-burned.

"Marlin, get back!" Rassel yelled as the fairies swarmed down into the cellar. He raised his hands to ward them off, but he was surrounded in a bright, feral mass.

Then the fairies flew at Marlin. A shot of adrenaline shocked him into motion. He backed away, waving his arms, trying to beat them off. The air was full of their snaky hissing. As they closed in, he could feel wafts of air propelled by fairy wings. He felt the impact of tiny, hot feet and hands on his skin. Then the fairies began to bite at him, sharp pinches like a thousand bee stings. He backed into the wall. The creatures writhed between his back and the packed earth, crowding in on his face, straddling his wrists and ankles. He flailed under the assault. Suddenly his right knee was a mass of agony; he sank to the floor. The fairy swarm closed around him. All he could hear was angry, savage buzzing. All he could feel was the shearing pain of being slowly flayed by tiny serrated teeth.

The fear and pain became a haze around him, a mist of red anguish, suddenly far away, part of a body not his own.

He had listened to his brother and mother, his mother and father before that, discussing ways of summoning the power of the world around them. Remembering their words like a dis-



Artwork by Allison Hershey

tant echo, he tried to reach out, moving away from the stinging bites along his arms and the raking claws on his face. He felt as if he were slowly being lifted out of himself. He expanded to fill the room, and then the room above him, and then the woods beyond the door. Distantly he felt his arms warm and wet, his cheeks ripe with wounds.

He felt a dull energy that he grabbed at. It smelled like the forest, like rain and earth, but it was faint and slick like mud. He wasn't sure it was what he was sensing, but he pulled it back with him down into the cellar and wrapped it around his family again and again until it formed a musky, soil-scented sheath.

He concentrated on nothing but that shield. Far away he could hear fairy wings, and his brother's moans, like a voice in a cave. He clutched at the power. Though the pain was steady, it wasn't intensifying; there were no new bites or scratches.

He held on.

He held on tight.

Marlin heard moaning — Rassel? — and the sloshing of water. His whole body ached. His whole body stung, too. Then he felt a cold, damp cloth on his cheek.

He opened his eyes.

"There you are." In the shadows above him, his mother's features weren't easily distinguished.

Marlin turned his head to look around. He was still in the cellar. The door to the kitchen above was open, the ladder propped up. Daylight fell through in a musty column. He lay on the floor, a blanket draped over him, a grass-woven mat beneath him. Rassel lay beside him, similarly covered. His

brother looked awful, patches of hair gone, his face pale, bruised, and torn; he'd be scarred unless May could work some healing on him. Marlin realized he felt as bad as Rassel looked, his whole body sore and his head a mass of pain.

Then he remembered.

"Did it work?" he croaked.

"We're here, aren't we?" May said. She rinsed out the cloth in the bowl beside where she knelt and wiped his face again. When she shifted her position, the light showed one hand bandaged with her kerchief. Her arms, face and neck were badly cut up. Her cheeks were still smeared with dirt and dried blood. "It seems, my Marlin, that you've come into your powers after all, and just in time, too." She sat back. "How did you know how to handle it?"

"I eavesdropped all those nights."

"Ah. Well. You kept us safe most of the night."

"Is everything all right?" He was thinking of the crashing he'd heard during the swarm.

"It's a mess up there. So many things are broken. But the house wasn't burned. We'll be fine." May reached down and touched the bead still suspended from Marlin's neck. "We were lucky." Her expression was closed, dark, and she frowned as she looked at her son.

"Are you thinking about Da?" Marlin asked.

May's mouth dropped open a little, and then she recovered. *Rassel was telling the truth,* Marlin thought. *The truth ...*

"Why would I be thinking of Khir?"

"Rassel told me, Mother. And you talked about Da before the fairies came down. This *is* what happened to him, isn't it?"

He watched May's face carefully, and saw a myriad of expressions furrow her features.

"I should show you something," she said, and got up. Her movements were stiff, as if she'd been kneeling too long. She climbed the ladder and disappeared above. Marlin looked around the room while she was gone, and could see bits of iridescence dotting the floor — fallen fairy wings. Baskets had been overturned, vegetables gnawed at.

She returned with a rag pouch knotted at one end. She set it down beside Marlin and pulled the knot apart. She drew from it a long, glossy, brown braid, tied at either end with strips of ragged leather thong.

"This was what was left of your father after the swarm that took him from us," May said. She handed it to Marlin. It was thick and heavy, and as soft as if it was newly-shorn. Marlin looked at his mother. She didn't look at him as she said, "That's what they found. That and bones."

"Just like this?" Marlin asked.

"Well," May said, snatching the braid back from him, "I trimmed it and tied off the loose end. I didn't want the plaiting to come undone." She wrapped the braid up quickly and stuffed the pouch into her pocket. "It's all that I have left, Marlin. That's all there is. If I hadn't had Darmin ... and ... and you boys, I don't know what I would have done."

"Darmin?" Marlin asked.

"He was a great help to me in those days."

"Why didn't you tell me about this? About *how* Da died?"

"Oh, Marlin!" May interrupted him sharply. "Stop it, just stop it! Your father's gone and ... and I made a mistake by not telling you the truth." Marlin could see May was upset, more upset than made sense somehow.

May got up and climbed the ladder once more.

Marlin thought hard. It seemed that he had stumbled upon more than he had realized. May and Rassel had always said that Khir had disappeared. But they knew — they both knew — that someday Marlin would have magic, he'd have to deal with fairies, and they didn't want to scare him with the truth of how Khir had died.

Rassel had indeed been right in everything he'd said — from the bad luck brought on by bothering the creatures of the earth to the responsibility that wielding magic would carry. Marlin understood his brother a little better now, and the reasons for things he'd done and said over the years.

May came back down the ladder.

"I'm sorry, Mother."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Marlin." She crouched beside him. "Once you're able to get up and talk to me, I want to know about everything that brought on the swarm. Then I'll deal with your brother. For the moment, we all have some healing to do. Then we'll talk."

"How long will we have to rest?"

"Until Lakkas Day, I think. By then we should all be better ...." She looked tired, old. "I think perhaps we'll start your lessons then," she said, smoothing his bangs aside, "and start to let your hair grow."

He nodded.

Lakkas Day, he thought. Time enough for penance and for truths. He planned to ask his mother many questions when he was well. ❄

Janna Silverstein is a freelance editor and writer who lives in Bellevue, WA. Her past credits include work as an editor at Bantam Books and as head of the Book Publishing division at Wizards of the Coast. Her short stories have been published in **SWASHBUCKLING EDITOR STORIES** and **GHOSTTIDE.**

Allison Hershey has been involved professionally in the science fiction and fantasy field for over twelve years. Her work has appeared in books, magazines, and commercial products. After spending 5 years as a computer animator and art director, she recently returned to freelance work and is currently living in Long Beach, California.

Artwork by Allison Hershey

LETTERS

Jackie Shank, Pacific City, OR

This is a thank-you letter, long overdue.

Thank you for putting out a magazine I really like — the stories, the illustrations, everything. In fact, I like it so much that I recently renewed my subscription for five years, exceedingly optimistic since I'm 71 years old. (But I had a pacemaker implanted a year ago, so perhaps five years is not unrealistic.)

Thank you for your helpful articles on writing, and your editorials.

Thank you for your rejection letters. I know they are "form letters" but there is such a variety that I am able to get a feel for why you rejected a story. I don't always agree with your evaluations, but your letters are more helpful than, "It doesn't fit our needs and better luck elsewhere."

Thank you for reading everything submitted to you. It's nice to know that I'm not being turned down by someone's first reader.

And finally, thank you, *thank you*, for accepting three stories and an article from me which, together with my book, **HAPPILY EVER AFTER, AND ALL THAT** constitute my entire professional fantasy output.

We owe you thanks, too, Jackie — or don't you realize how hard it is for an editor to find good stuff to publish? — MZB

Jennifer Ashley, off the Net

Mary Jo wrote, "In contrast, a nice little mystery or sf/f story can be built around some slight but clever plot idea. Characters don't have to be well-developed as long as they serve the idea adequately."

I have to disagree with you, Mary Jo. As a mystery and sci-fi short story writer I know that most mysteries and sf/f (especially sf/f) are very character driven nowadays. Often these stories can be almost entirely about characters with little plot to hold it all together. Read *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*, *Ellery Queen*, and *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (or is that the other way around?) and you'll see what I mean. Very deep, very intense character-driven stories, even if the characters are aliens. There are still some clever plot stories, but editors are after character-driven stories. So that can't be the only explanation.

I don't think it's so much that romances are character-driven more than other kinds of stories, but we meet characters in romance we want to spend 400 pages with — three pages just aren't enough. In mystery or sf/f, the characters that are created aren't always appealing, in fact sometimes they're downright disturbing, and we're happy that they go away fast! Romance characters are people we want to know and love for a long time before we have to let them go.

Anyone can cook up a plot by rote — but the knack of creating characters which the reader can really care about is a rare talent. — MZB

Theresa Bayer, from the Net

Got an idiot question for you — I received the "occult" rejection letter from *MZBFM* and have since been looking for a working definition of the "occult" fiction genre. So far, not much luck — the glossaries in various how-to-write books don't seem to include occult (must be hidden or something). Could you please tell me your definition of occult? Or, if you happen to have a back issue of MZBFM that mentions genre definitions — I'm ordering several back issues in a separate communication.

Thanks & best wishes,

P.S. An idea — putting genre definitions on rejection form letters

I can only give my impressions — it's more a question of the way one looks at the world. I personally tend to think it's a form of religion — try reading some of the books on the subject by Dion Fortune (Violet Firth), a psychologist who was also an occultist. Or read my books ***HEARTLIGHT*** *or* ***THE INHERITOR*** *— they deal with occult philosophy. Or the work of William Grey, or ask in the "Occult/New Age" section of any book shop — they'll tell you as much or more than you want to know. Some far-right Christian groups don't approve — which says more about them than it does about occultism. — MZB*

Marion has instructed me to reject any "life-after-death" stories as occult; perhaps that describes your story, Theresa. — reh

Carol Cheevers, Carrollton, TX

Congratulations on your tenth anniversary! I'll be happy to subscribe to your magazine for ten more years.

In response to your editorial. It's obviously impossible to separate writers from readers. So why try? You've probably inspired more aspiring writers than you'll ever know. I've learned a lot about manuscript submission from you. I promise I will never submit a manuscript single-spaced on colored paper, without my name on each page. There are many editors that should be thanking you.

Good luck in your next ten years.

We hope to be doing this for ten more years if we live that long. — MZB

Leland R. Erickson, from the Net

In your most recent editorial in *MZBFM* you wrote, "It's certain that I've learned more from talking to writers than I could have ever taught them."

With all due respect to you, Ma'am, I must disagree. When I attended BayCon for the first time several years ago I asked you (with no small amount of anxiety!) what advice you might have for some simple schmo like me who had the nerve to think he had any hope of being a writer. You graciously shared with me advice you had received from Robert A. Heinlein; "Write it down when you think of it, and don't change a thing unless it is editorially mandated."

Well, I went and followed that advice. In collaboration with a friend, who just happens to be a professional writer himself, I went and got myself published in the adventure gaming mainstream (**Silent Death: Fighter Tactics Manual**). By drawing from our mutually extensive historical knowledge, my good friend Sheldon Greaves and I produced a tactical manual for a popular SF space fighter game that drew heavily on historical sources and actual tactical models. The series editor was, as it turned out, enthusiastic about our results. Since then I have continued to follow your shared advice to writers, and have thus far delivered several additional joint projects and two solo manuscripts for the same series as of last week. I am currently working on several additional projects.

Now I grant you that the adventure gaming industry is a niche market hardly comparable to actual fiction writing (and I'll be lucky to ever get paid for my work in this industry). But I genuinely believe it to be a good first step as I am fortunate enough not to be starving at the present time! More importantly, I doubt very much that if a certain famous author hadn't passed on some sound advice to me a few years ago, I wouldn't have had the nerve to start actually writing. Considering what it has meant to me finally to be published in the mainstream of sorts, I can never begin to repay you for your patience and kindness in sharing with me advice passed on to you by another writer. I suspect that there is a continuity of sorts in all this.

Well, good luck to you. Yes, no doubt gaming has a place — but they haven't dug it yet. (As you may have guessed, I am a woman of strong and definite opinions.) — MZB

Priscilla W. Armstrong, Prioress
The Order of Saint Michael, Baltimore, MD
Re: THE LAST WORD, #39, Spring 1998
Dear Marion and Rachel,

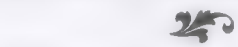
That was indeed The Last Word. When our Order was made aware of Jo Clayton's illness by a West Coast member, we immediately put her on our prayer list. And members who also are members of other groups added her to the lists they had in operation.

It was late in the day for "curing" (as opposed to "healing") so we prayed that Jo would have a holy death, peaceful and right for her. Thank you for bringing us up to date, Rachel, with the information that it was indeed a peaceful and holy death. We forget that Death is the final healing for us mortals. So we can say, "for her, death is past and pain is ended and she has entered into the Place that the Divine has prepared for her from the beginning of Time."

And there, she can have all the green corduroy hats she wishes!

We can all use prayer, I guess. The modern society tends to feel "death is the last enemy" and would like to eliminate it — but then how would people grow? The early Christians believed in reincarnation — the later church fathers read it out of the official creed because they feared people would take salvation for granted and stop praying and working for salvation. That says more about them than it does about reincarnation. Someday we'll all know the truth — when it no longer matters. — MZB

Priscilla, thank you for your thoughts and forgiveness. — reh



Valory Pietruszenko, Oxnard, CA

Regarding your response to the letter from Steve Fahnestalk in issue 39 — Hurray, Hurrah! If you need a second for a duel over where quotation marks should be put, I'm your gal. This particular subject has driven me batty for years, and probably even lost me a job keyboarding for a professional journal. It made absolutely no sense to me to put a period or comma inside quotation marks, especially if the quotation marks framed only one word.

If a quotation has punctuation, of course that punctuation must appear inside the quotation marks to be a proper citation. Why then do we add our own punctuation to a quotation by placing our own punctuation within the quotation marks?

This little dispute helped me further define why I enjoy your short stories so much. Your main characters have a practicality that makes sense, a feature many people seem to like about others, but one which most people seem to lack.

I look forward to future last words and responses to letters with my magazine renewal. Your hard work is truly appreciated.

I guess I'll stay out of this one — leave it to you folks who care one way or the other. — MZB

Janée Rutledge, Kittery, ME

There are two things I would like to say. First, I really like this magazine. Second, while I was reading one of the older ones I saw a mistake. I don't know if you fixed it in a later one but I'm assuming you did not. It was in Fall 1995 issue 29 title "Caitlin's Magic". The author had Miss Fox as a sorcerer when females are called a sorceress.

I would also like to request a copy of your writers' guidelines. I have written a few stories although they are not quite finished but they will be soon. One question I have is if authors have to be a certain age to submit to your magazine.

Nobody ever called us infallible. My own daughter gave me a lot of grief when I called her an "actress" — she wanted to be called an actor.

If you're old enough to write, you're old enough to be published. — MZB

We've published stories from writers in their teens, but in general the stories we have seen from people under age sixteen tend to lack interesting, well-developed plots. — reh

Darrell Schweitzer, Philadelphia, PA

Congratulations on reaching your 40th issue (a 10th anniversary no less!). I am surprised you didn't herald this fact on the cover. In any case, it is a substantial accomplishment. You have just overtaken the record of *Unknown* by one issue. For forty issues now you've made a substantial contribution to keeping the imaginary-world fantasy short story alive, often when there were few other markets. This is one of those things which is worth doing, whether it makes money in the short-run or not.

As always , I am proud to be published in *MZB's FM.*

Looking forward to other 40 issues.

Darrell, when we started, there were few or no other markets: "They change and perish all, but we remain —" I forget where that quote comes from, so consider it would be credited if I knew to whom to credit it. — MZB

❄

Moving?

Your subscription copy of FANTASY Magazine will not be forwarded by the U.S. Post Office. If you don't send us a change of address notice, your issue will be delayed. We have even lost track of several subscribers entirely. Please send us a change of address as soon as you know it.

Met By Moonlight

by Marion Zimmer Bradley

"O, 'Proud Titania,'" she whispered to herself, grimacing. It would be easier — getting a child — if he were mortal. Mortal men were easy to trick: a moment's passion, a joining of bodies, and it was done. But in the Faery world it was not so simple, even with Oberon — or maybe especially with Oberon.

He had not understood, when he stole the boy from her with his pranks and love-potions. For him it had been but a game: she had it; he wanted it. But that changeling-child had filled a place in her that she had never before thought empty. She had taken him for his mother's sake, but kept him for his own. Now Oberon had the changeling-child. Would he begrudge her what she sought?

She watched the faery-court dancing in a moonlit ring. With every round, Oberon's naked moonshadow flickered past her feet where she sat her flower-throne. She felt it pass like a breath of air but did not yet reach for it. Would he understand her desire or would it frighten him? For the faery kind — even as for mortals — the fathering of a son brings whispers of Time and Mortality and Death. Would he dare it? For her? She risked far more if she was not certain. And yet, was it not always so — for mortal women as well as faery-folk — that the mother bore more risk?

The shadow stopped before her, then fell across her lap, and she looked up. The tempest danced in his dark hair and his eyes were the gray of winter seas. Where she was flowers and dew-drops and earth, he was wild winds and tangled thickets and unseasonal storms. And how she loved him. How could she have wished him mortal, even for a moment?

"Will you not dance?" he asked.

She looked away, down at her hands where her fingers twined covertly in his shadow. "Later, mayhap. I —" She stood and turned away so he would not see the small dark mass she gathered. "There is something I must seek." She slipped away, towards the marshes, leaving Oberon to shrug and rejoin the dance.

Pale flickers danced out among the reeds, like fickle reflections of the stars above. Titania leaned over the water to see her own reflection, slender and beautiful, blue-eyed, silver-haired, the pale oval of her face playing the moon to those stars floating in the forest pool. The flickering sprites dancing over the waters took little notice — they had no substance of their own and the doings of faeries meant no more to them than those of mortals. But it was from those insubstantial will-o-the-wisps that faery children were engendered.

Titania's heart reached out, as her eyes moved across the dancing lights, expectant, seeking. And one of the sprites moved slowly closer in its darting flickering dance until it looked up at her with eyes that sought and welcomed her as surely as hers did it. She held out Oberon's shadow and the sprite slipped into it, blinking and glowing in delight at even such an insubstantial form. And then she bound it to her with the silver cord of her soul and there was no going back.

The thing was done and irrevocable; her own soul felt the soul of the seeking sprite and each soul called to the other, *I am yours forever.* For each, for all time. If only that were all. But that was only the simplest part. If Oberon recognized the sprite, and bound his soul to it as well, then its shadow-form would take

Artwork by George Barr

on faery-flesh and it would be their child. But if he failed to recognize it — or refused — the shadow-form would fade, and the sprite would return to its flickering will-o-the-wisp existence in the marshes, with not even a memory of what had almost been. And she — she had bound herself to it and to its fate. She would fade and flicker out as well. All her magical immortality could not save her.

She gathered herself together in anticipation. She could almost see the pale shadow clinging to her own. As if he could hear, she whispered to herself in a small hidden voice, "Don't you be afraid; we've got each other anyhow, buttercup." There was, of course, no answer — but, almost, she imagined something vulnerable and small, clinging, dependent on her alone.

A glow of light came softly down the path into the clearing. Oberon. She had known — hoped — he would follow. Now came the great temptation — which she must resist. She withdrew into the shadows that lay at the borders of the pool and summoned a frill of rainbow mist to conceal herself. And with her whole concentrated soul she watched the shadow-sprite dancing and fluttering in the clearing. She ached to speak — almost to breathe — for him, but this she could not do. The frail little sprite must make itself known to Oberon by its own efforts.

And as she watched Oberon's approach to the sprite, she remembered once more why she had loved him at first. He was gentle, sweet, wholly lovable beyond all men and elves. But, too, she had loved his wildness, his unpredictability. And now, just once, she wished she could know what he would do.

Had he seen it? Yes, she thought. He paused. For a moment, it seemed he would walk through the drift of shadow, neither seeing nor hearing, and her heart ached in her breast. How could he pass this fair, bright creature? Would it blame her for interrupting its solitary, endless dreaming in the marsh? For poising it on the knife-edge of substance and non-existence? It seemed it was she who hung there, alone, calling wordlessly, a mere shivering breath on the wind. It was already real to her — almost, she felt its minute weight in her arms and again she whispered soundlessly, "At least we've got each other, buttercup." It seemed she could recall some such words as this far in her own past ... too long ago to come clear.

The thoughts ran through her mind in an instant. And then recognition and understanding flashed in Oberon's great golden eyes. He extended his arms to the shadow before him and breathed, "Well, if you're not the cutest little thing in this marsh!" And then he raised his head and said aloud, "Are you there, my love? I think I've found what you were seeking."

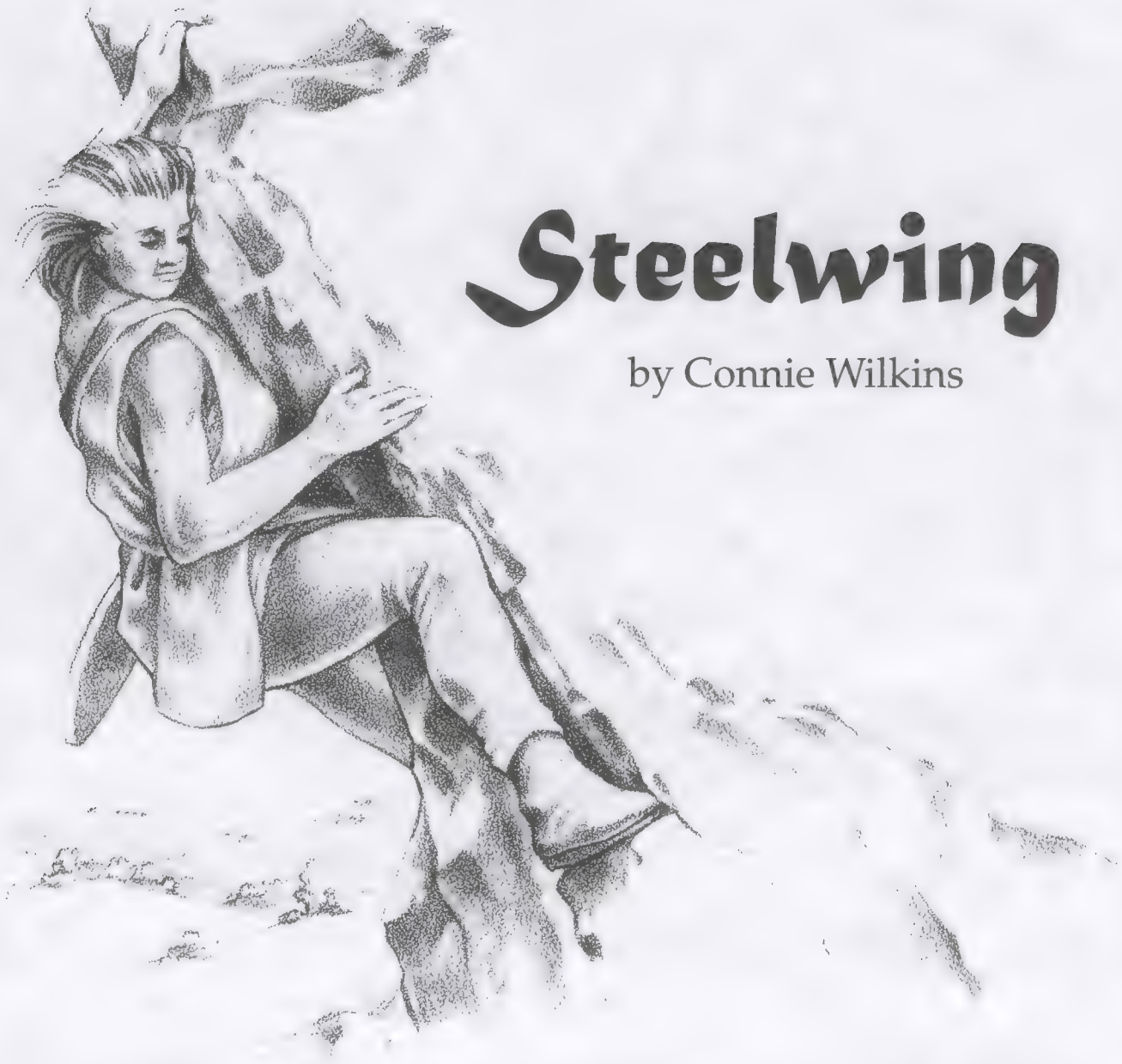
He swung around, searching the twilight. She stepped from out the rainbow mist, stumbling a little from the tears of relief blurring her eyes. He ran a finger across her cheek to brush away a luminous pearl.

"Well met by moonlight, Proud Titania," he whispered. "Well met indeed." ❄

Marion Zimmer Bradley is the editor of this magazine.

George Barr illustrates frequently for these pages and has won the Cauldron on many occasions.

Artwork by George Barr



Steelwing

by Connie Wilkins

The gray cliff loomed over the green valley, welcoming me after the months of campaigning on the dusty eastern slopes. I readied the password, but any sentry or White Robe guarding Above would know Steelwing by sight.

The lift had just started up the sheer rock wall. I slowed so that there would be no question of bringing it back for me.

It wasn't reluctance to pull rank, or lack of confidence in the Power of the White Robe who controlled the intricate system of ropes and wheels. It wasn't even the masculine form riding the platform. I have dealt with men often enough, and was even mildly curious about the presence of an emissary from the Lords' armies.

It was simply for love of the climb. Steep trails and high places have always drawn me, and in spite of my troublesome knees I was not yet ready to give up the thrust of the mountain beneath my feet. To the long, slow life of the stone I am scarcely more than the flick of a fly's wing, but still I feel a part of that life.

The White Robe inclined her head, and I nodded, surprised that she wasn't concentrating on the passenger. I glanced upward. The man's feet didn't actually touch the platform by a good handspan.

"He goes under his own Power," she said, amused at my surprise. "He keeps the appearance of riding the lift, in case of observation."

"Surely our wards are sufficient to block enemy seers!" I was deeply disturbed, but not by her words. I knew in a general way that, though rare, it was not unknown for a male to be born with Power, but I didn't know, didn't *dare* to know, why this reminder caused me such pain.

I welcomed the exertion of the climb. By the last switchback a measure of serenity had returned, only to vanish as the sentry turned to face me.

My impulse was to throw my arms around her, but we were watched from dark cave entrances and even through solid rock. We merely gripped each other's forearms.

Arka had gone from my command into the personal service of the White

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Robes, and I had planned to look for her on this visit. My military side considered her too good a warrior to be wasted standing guard on a stronghold in no real danger of assault. Still, too many who came to me as raw, half-trained girls grew into seasoned companions, only to fall under the steel and spells of the enemy or the talons of their minions.

I was startled, but not by the suddenness of her appearance. I stared at her dark hair, oak-leaf red except where pale wing-shapes swept upward at the temples. My hand lifted to my own head, as if fingertips could feel the difference between the gray streaks and the black strands surrounding them.

"It's a badge some of us wear," Arka said. "A sign of having served under Steelwing." A slight flush tinged the brown skin. "Perhaps we should have asked you first."

"I suppose it does no harm." I was unsure how I felt about this. "As long as no one follows me into battle like that."

"No, we know the wings are your pennant, we have found you by them often enough through clouds of dust."

"Well." I remembered my summons. "I think no one will march behind this banner again, so it scarcely matters." I gripped her arm once more and passed on, conscious of observers.

The young Gray Robe who guided me within was new to me, but White Rena waited in the lighted chamber as so many times before. The course of war often required conference between leaders from the field and those who directed from Above. She was as skilled at strategy as at wielding Power, and I ...

I fought back the intrusive thought. The Robe was not for me. I had no Power, would not seek it, would not accept it even if it found me.

"Steelwing, welcome." There was a hint of amusement in her voice. "I suppose you noticed Arka's hair?"

"My eyes are still strong, even if my knees are going." I took the cushion she offered and sank onto it with just the slight delay that let her be seated first. "You think you've wrung all the foolishness out of them ...."

"There's no need to wring out all the youth. War does that soon enough."

I nodded agreement as I took a steaming cup from the tray before me. Such small talk was unusual from White Rena, but we had been through much together, and were as close to being friends as our different roles allowed. I didn't mind waiting for her to get to the point, enjoying the tranquil breath of herbs rising from the cup.

"You have a rare way with the young," she said at last. Her words seemed to stab at me, but some pain is better left unexplained. I had expected this, after all, an assignment to the training valley. I might have the skill and spirit of a warrior, but I no longer had the knees, though I could still outmarch those who had less experience of endurance and pain.

"I have managed to beat many a wild one into shape, sometimes quite literally." It was as well to leave command before they had reason to doubt that I still could.

"You have mothered many a lost child, too, I know."

Again that stab of pain, and a suspicion that she intended it.

"Those who need it most would spit on the word 'mother'."

A narrow eyebrow lifted. "You sound like the foremost spitter, yet you were not left as a babe on the Maker's Stone, as are so many. You came to us of your own will, a woman grown."

"And the White Robes took me in, walled out the pain that drove me there, and gave me life and purpose. I do not forget that." I stood, with a twinge, and faced her rigidly. "I am wholly yours to command. You need not lead me through mind games."

"Steelwing ... Sarym ..." Her hands gripped mine and urged me down again.

Her compassion was beyond doubting; so too was the hidden purpose behind her use of the old name, my one memory of that other life. I questioned not the purpose but the method.

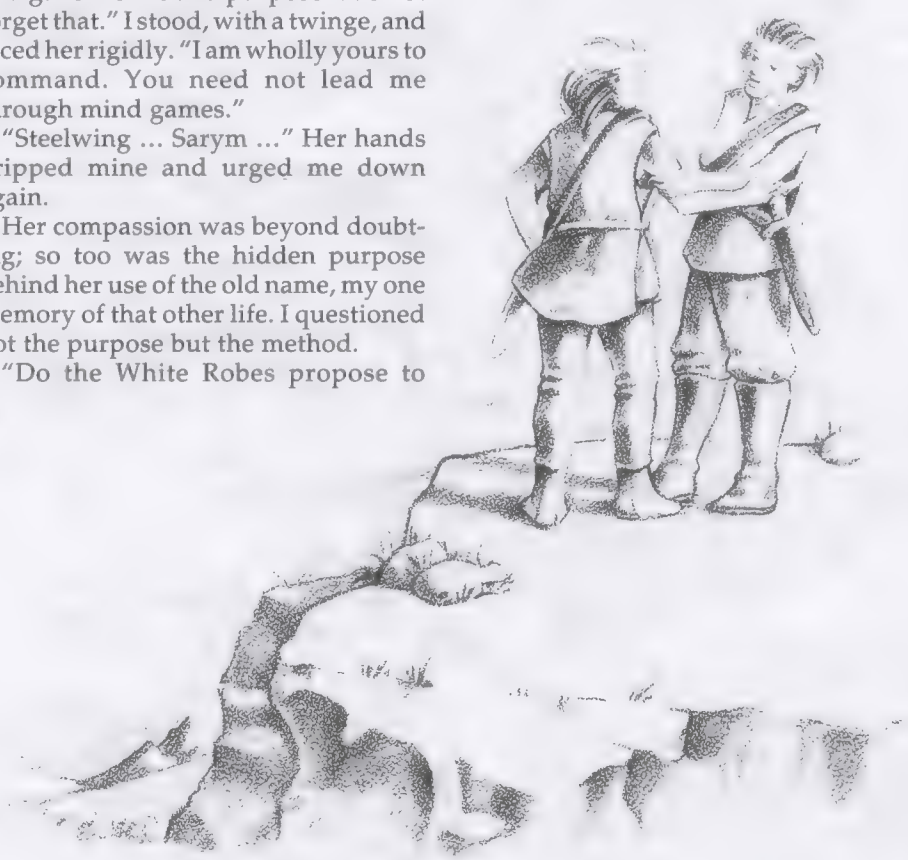
"Do the White Robes propose to remove the memory block?" I refrained from adding, "If my sword is no longer of value to you," but she heard it in my bluntness.

"If you truly believe the wall is still the one we made, you have answered my question." She was equally blunt now. "That wore off long ago, and would never have worked except by your own will. I only wished to discover how much you have allowed yourself to remember."

She saw my expression. "You think I should not need to ask? Believe! It is not courtesy, or even friendship," and here she touched my hand again, "that stays me from the mind probe. White Rena cannot reach thoughts that Steelwing wishes to keep private, much less penetrate what she will not reveal even to herself. I do not say that it could not be done, by those who specialize, but we will not treat our own like enemy spies!" From her grim tone I suspected that a certain faction Above favored doing just that.

"Why is it so important that I remember?" Curiosity couldn't fill the cold hollow in my gut, but it could grant me superficial distraction.

"Better now than in the middle of a vital mission." This was distraction worth having, and I leaned forward,



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only to be dashed back.

"As your Power grows it will break down its own barriers. You *will* remember." She waved off my denial. "We would give you time if we could. Your sword has been worth more to us than spells and wards, your leadership more than any White Robe's Power. And you have not entirely suppressed your other ... skills, from what I've heard."

"Rumors," I muttered, staring into the tepid dregs of my cup, seeing sparse tufts of grass on boulder-strewn slopes.

I knew what was whispered, that Steelwing did more than choose the best terrain, that the land itself changed as she surveyed it. Let them think that if it gave them confidence. And if I could touch a rocky outcropping and feel what moved across the earth ten leagues or more away ... Anyone with focus and experience should be able to do the same.

"Mmm." She didn't need to remind me that her focus and experience could reveal the smallest detail of a battle raging anywhere in the world from her post Above. I had felt her sight brush me often enough, and known it for hers, even though there were other White Robes with the same power.

"I do only what is necessary," I said into the cup, then realized that a Gray Robe hovered at my shoulder with a fresh pitcher. We were silent until she had departed, letting the hot essence work away the tension.

"So do we all," she sighed. We were colleagues again.

"We have had disturbing news," she went on. "What do you make of this?"

Her news didn't come as a complete surprise. I have my own sources of rumor. I knew that contact had increased of late with the armies of men to the north, that something was happening there that drove the Lords to consult, however reluctantly, with the White Robes of Above.

I have fought beside men, on the borders where our fronts overlap, and found them easy enough to deal with once battle proved us equal in strength and blood and filth.

That their swords were once turned against us is irrelevant. Now a common enemy surges up from the dry plains, desperate for the green valleys beyond our sheltering mountains.

The men are, after all, our brothers, and if peace ever comes they will gladly go back to tilling the valleys. If they still lay female infants on the Maker's Stone it will be in tribute now, and to honor the babes, rather than to dispose of them.

If peace comes, in fact, there will be a shortage of women in the valleys. To see ex-soldiers come seeking our swordmaidens as sweethearts and helpmates would be interesting indeed, even more so if they succeed.

But peace is a dream. Reality is the steady pressure of dusty legions pounding against our eastern bastions, and this new threat reported in the high mountain valleys of the north.

"I know those valleys."

"Yes."

"It's not remembering. Hills I have known stay with me like my own bones. It's something apart from memory."

"I know."

I ignored her small victory. "What do the White Robes and the Lords have in mind for me?"

"You must go there, disguised, and get past the wards that keep us from seeing. Those alone would be cause for alarm, but now we hear that streams from those heights are drying up, blocked somewhere above. The few

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herders in that area have disappeared with their flocks on the far side of the wards."

"What makes you think I can get through?"

"As you said, you know those hills; I would not want to be the one to try to stop you. And you will not be alone."

I suspected something of what was coming.

"You will need to cross the settled valleys, where a woman alone, even of your age, would cause comment. The Lords have sent a man, one who has been serving in the north and knows as much as anyone of what is happening there."

"How long has this been going on? It must have taken him weeks to get here."

"No." She watched me closely. "Days only. That is part of his Power."

I didn't give her the satisfaction of surprise. "I saw a man coming up, but he was dressed as a soldier."

"The Lords may have learned of recent years to value and nurture Power in a male, but they allow it no political status. Tan Ruald is a soldier of middle rank, and unlikely to be allowed to advance higher. They would like, of course, to be free of reliance on *our* talents, but there's small chance of that."

I scarcely heard her dry voice. A trembling had seized me, though the liquid in my cup showed scarcely a ripple.

White arms circled my bent shoulders, the soft wool brushing my face. "Sarym, truly, it might be better to remember all now, before you are in danger." That Rena, my friend, knelt before me in her white robes should have been enough to persuade me.

Her hood had slipped back; I leaned my black head briefly against her gray one. "If I remembered, I might not go at all. And danger brings out the best in me."

"True enough." She sighed and rose, and the Gray Robe reappeared. "I will say no more than you have already guessed. I know enough of your past, from other sources, to know that this mission will plunge you deeply into it. I could not send you forth without that much warning, but I will force no knowledge on you against your will. Time and circumstance will attend to that."

She moved toward the entrance and I followed. "The bathing pool will be heated by now. Tan Ruald can wait a bit longer to meet you. Let me try a thing or two on those knees. Nothing permanent, I'm afraid, but enough to take you where you must go."

When at last I descended from Above, I rode the lift platform, Tan Ruald a silent presence at my side. I had some vague thought of not making him choose whether to follow me on foot. Only when he spoke to the White Robe at the base did I recall that he could get himself down the cliff without benefit of either trail or mechanical device. He might even despise us for combining Power and invention, but I saw no sign of it in his face.

He flushed a little under my gaze without looking away. I realized, now that I took the trouble to notice, that he was a dozen or so years younger than I. Not quite young enough to be ... be what?

"I'm sorry to seem so distracted. This mission was sprung on me rather abruptly. I'm only beginning to adjust to the situation."

"Understandable." His voice was light and a little husky. "I knew of the mission sooner, but not that my companion would be ... would be the legendary Steelwing."

"Legendary, am I? You must have been surprised to find me still alive!"

"No, just surprised to find you merely mortal."

I liked his smile. "Don't jump to conclusions!"

He laughed outright. We swung off together toward the river and the waiting boat.

"We'll have to work out our travel identities," I said, and he nodded. "One thing sure ... no, two things. You can't call me Steelwing among the valley folk. Call me Sarym."

"Sarym," he repeated. "You can call me Ruald. And what's the other sure thing?"

I surveyed his angular form and trim, tawny beard. "That *I'll* be the one condemned to wear women's clothes!"

"Now who's jumping to conclusions?"

We became good friends in the two weeks it took us to cross to the northern mountains. The river carried us down into the valley, but our way to the north took us upstream, and the waters coming down from those mountains were much diminished.

We traveled on foot, without even a dog-cart, in case an emergency called for Ruald's Power. Occasionally, when a night was dark and deserted enough, he would lift me to skim with him above the ground, but it tired him and was hardly worth the risk of being seen. I was always glad to make contact with the earth again.

We had settled it that I was to be a wealthy widow, and he my younger second husband, accompanying me on a visit to the district of my youth. This way my lack of subservience would not be too remarkable, though I was careful not to overdo it.

The only problem came in private. It was entirely the fault of my wayward body. Of all the difficulties I might have foreseen, this would have been the last, but during the second week the enforced closeness seemed to set off alarms in my system. There was a sense that fertility was fast fleeting, and a driving impulse to make up for lost time.

I swear I made no outward sign, but Ruald, of course, couldn't help but respond to this aura, and then be hurt and confused when I reacted with panic and rage. I tried to explain it to us both.

"I told you that I have no conscious memory beyond my eighteen years as a soldier. Something from those hidden years grips me, chills me, even if I wish to reach out. It's a poor excuse, I know, but the truth." I didn't add that it was his Power that seemed to terrify me most.

He lay silent, facing the wall. I was lucky he hadn't struck out at me. *He* was lucky he hadn't struck out.

"We could pretend to quarrel, take separate rooms. Whatever you think best."

"Thinking has nothing to do with it, has it?" He got up without looking at me and went out to the inn's barn.

Ruald's solution was to expend so much Power that at the end of each day he was exhausted, and we were that much closer to our goal. It may have helped him, but it didn't do much for me. Fortunately, as the familiar hills began to rise around us, I became my old self, or an even older self than I knew.

I surged past Ruald time and again, refusing to let him take us to the air on the valid grounds that we might be under surveillance. The truth was that I took strength from the harsh touch of the rocky ground.

Ruald had shown me, with maps drawn in sand, where the first signs of trouble had appeared and how the

warded area had quickly spread over a large district. It was clear that one especially prominent peak was a focal point, but he was content to let me set whatever course I chose. I wondered what rumors he had heard about Steelwing.

The air cooled as we climbed, but I shed my fine cloak and left it rolled under a bush. I would have left my skirt too, if I dared, but contented myself with tying it up to leave my legs free to the knees.

Sweeping vistas opened before us, of forested slopes and high meadows and ever higher ridges and peaks uncrossable by any army. Tongues of white licked down the mountains' flanks, ravines still filled with snow, though in the lower valleys the growing season was well advanced. My elation grew, even as a dull pain began to throb beneath it all.

"You look like someone coming home." The voice startled me. Ruald must have cheated to catch up.

I looked involuntarily toward the wooded notch just above us. There should have been a brown roof, and smoke curling from a stone chimney, but I saw neither.

I looked to the right, where a stream should have tumbled almost at our feet, but the pebbles and boulders in the dry bed were pale and naked to the sun.

The pain grew, and drove me harder, even as I sensed the wall of warding ahead. Ruald's eyes went blank as he probed, searching for an upper limit. Then the merest shake of his head told me that there was no "over" for him to take us.

We were on a well-used track. There might be a gate of sorts, probably guarded; they wouldn't want travelers to spread tales of an invisible barrier. In any case it would look more suspicious to turn back now than to go on.

We passed into the dappled shade of white, slender trees. The tender green of their leaves flickered, swam, blurred before my eyes; then awareness skewed, and flashes of gold streamed suddenly through my mind. Golden leaves were falling around me, sobs ripping through me as tears burned down my face and I ran, ran, from an agony of guilt that could never be escaped, a gaping loss that could never be filled ....

But I had not moved, and Ruald, without touching, held me up. I saw his worried face. I felt for the solid rock under the thin soil, sank my consciousness into it, and knew who and where I was.

And knew what lay ahead.

"There is someone just around that boulder." My full age, and more, was in my voice now, but I was past caring. "Stay back a little, and don't seem surprised at anything I do." The white trees thinned to brush for a space before the dark evergreens began, and here they had posted their sentry.

The old man moved stiffly, jerkily. Even in middle age he had been awkward, but this was different; he might have been a wooden puppet.

"Oh, Jep, Jep, you're still here!" I let honest tears spill over. "Don't you know me, Jep? It's Sarym, come back to ... to see ... my boy." I couldn't go on. I pulled off the scarf covering my hair and saw recognition grow slowly in the old eyes.

"Mistress Sarym ... aye, I'd forgot what happened to your hair when ... well, back then." His stance eased slightly, as though some distant controller had registered his recognition and decided to let us pass.

"It must be all overgrown by now ...."

"No, Mistress, I've kept all clear, the young one's and the master's too." There was a gentle rebuke, that I seemed

to grieve for the son but not the father. It wasn't true; the guilt and grief for the one were so overpowering that there was no room for more, and yet there was more, more than I could ever bear.

"I'd show the way, but I must keep here. It's right along up there ...."

"I could never forget!" I tied the scarf again and pulled it forward to hide my ravaged face. "Bless you, Jep, for tending them. I couldn't ... couldn't come back until now." I reached for Ruald's hand and tugged him forward, letting Jep think that I had feared to come without an escort, though if he remembered anything of me in the old days he would doubt that. Or perhaps not; I realized that I was leaning hard on Ruald's arm as we climbed into the shade of the evergreens, and it was not for show.

The narrow path branched from the main track, still passable though we bent beneath occasional branches. Brush had grown up in the clearing around the house, and I tried not to look at the shuttered windows or to hear the murmurs and laughter of other days, another life. Someday I might be able to remember the happy times, the love and hope, but first I had to face the pain and the final devastation.

Ruald fell back to let me advance alone into the grassy space old Jep had kept cleared. I knelt first before the stone marker where my husband lay, straining to focus on memories of his gentleness, his strength, his humor, before the struggle to save our son had worn them away. He had been twice my age, but I had loved him, and he had loved me enough to accept me as I was, neither of us suspecting what might come of it.

I could get no farther back than that day when all hope came crashing down, when he found Rorik, and I came in to find them both, the son dead by his own hand and the father killed by grief.

I was shaking. I turned and crawled a pace to the other marker, and the shaking intensified. Perhaps I reached back a hand, gave some sign; Ruald was suddenly beside me, steadying me. I looked into his eyes, and saw him flinch at the bitterness, even hatred, in mine.

"How did *you* survive?" Tears scorched my throat. "How were you taught to bear it, use it, not let it tear you apart?"

He understood. "It was not as hard for me as for some. My Power is of a limited kind, and I could hide it, or use it to escape harassment. And my father had the same, to a lesser degree, and could guide me."

I stared at him blankly.

"You do know, don't you, that Power in a male must come through both parents? It may be submerged, but it must be there."

I had not known, had thought the curse had come only through me, pun-

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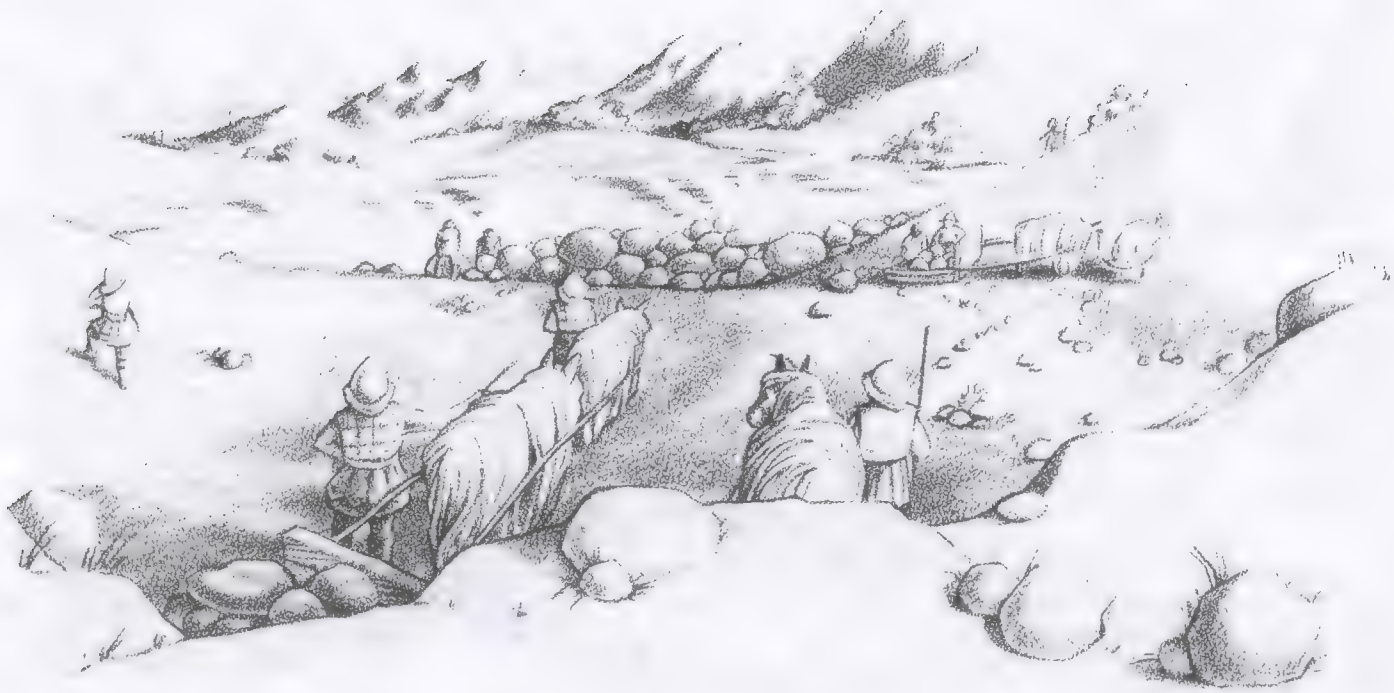

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ishment perhaps for my attempts to deny it in myself. "It wasn't all my fault, then ...." The grief was no less intense, but in time I might be able to let go of some of the guilt.

"But I should have been able to help him through it. I kept him going for twelve years, but when manhood started to come upon him it was all too much. He ... he cursed me for giving him life, even as he clung to me for comfort. I told him that he would grow into it, control would come, if he would only endure, but his pain was too great .... I thought it must come harder to a male, it hadn't been as bad for me, and I could always hide it if I wished ...."

I had never truly known pain until I struggled with my son's. To be a mother, to give life, then see that life filled with anguish, rejected ... to feel such depths of failure, guilt, despair ....

I shrank from the memory, wanting only to sink into the earth, to become stone, to join the imponderably slow life of the mountain. If I willed it hard enough ...

Ruald shook me gently, then harder. Anxiety verged on panic in his voice. "Remember Steelwing, the warrior! There is much more to your life, there are those who need you!"

Some recollection of my recent life returned. I put a hand on the stone marker, for support or as caress I do not know, and felt vibrations rising from the bulk of the mountain.

Somewhere in the higher distance I felt the tread of many feet, more than these mountains had ever known in the past. There were animals, too, and not just the sheep who traditionally foraged in the high meadows. There was the grate of stone on stone, and rumblings difficult to interpret.

I stood, and relief smoothed Ruald's face. I could see in his eyes that he beheld Steelwing again, the "legendary" Steelwing, not an old woman wracked by past grief newly remembered.

"We must climb a little farther, to an overlook. I begin to understand what the enemy is planning, but we must observe as much as we can."

By the time we reached the stone outcropping on the mountain's shoulder I knew what we would see. The next ridge dipped to form a large, high basin, but where I remembered the lush green of grass we now saw the glint of sunlight on water.

Then we saw the duller glint of metal helmets, and the movement of large dun-colored beasts. The touch of the mountain itself told me before my eyes what the enemy was doing. They were hauling sledges of stone and earth to increase the height of the wall that kept all but a trickle of water from flowing down into the valleys.

Ruald said something, but I scarcely heard. I was following pathways through the stone, feeling densities, cracks, shifts in strata. My senses passed under the ridge where the enemy worked, where the claws of their minion beasts scraped and cracked against the rocky ground, and farther, to the subterranean hollows I had once thought none but myself would ever know existed.

Somehow they had found them, had forced entrances from the plains beyond and followed the caverns up into our mountains, even bringing their beasts. I had never heard of others who could feel through rock as I did, but there might be some among the enemy with that Power.

Their purpose was clear; to block the water that flowed from the highest peaks, where clouds were caught and drained before they could pass to the east, and channel it down through the tunnels into their dry plains.

I could admire the concept, even as I knew they must be stopped. Besides the hardship the diversion of water would cause my people, a base on this side of the range would allow the enemy to spread their power behind our lines and conquer us at last.

Ruald tugged at me now, with hands and mind, but I was spreading my awareness in great arcs through the stone around each side of the basin.

Then a strike like lightning slammed into me, and I staggered and fell. He had tried to warn me. Enemy Watchers had detected us, recognized our Power,

and turned theirs against us.

I clutched at the mountain, and shook within it, and the earth shook with me. Then another strike hit.

A force tried to lift me off the ground, to break my connection. Ruald tensed with effort, exerting all his Power to hold me down. I melded with the mountain, reached into the faults where the solid masses pressed against each other, but the striking forces kept on, distracting me.

"Above! Help!" Ruald gasped. I pulled back into myself and sent one pure beam of thought toward the southeast, piercing the wards from within, where they were weakest.

Instant strength flowed back along that beam. I could feel White Rena sheltering me as though her white-robed form bent over mine, and the strikes ceased. Other forces from Above brushed past on their way to counter the enemy's Power. Ruald's contorted face eased.

Once again I gripped the massive body of the mountain range, felt my way through fused strata and tilted slabs. I clenched my arms, and the earth shook again, tumbling stones from the wall that held back the water. I eased back, fearing damage below if all the water surged down at once; then I loosed boulders to plummet down from the slopes above onto the panicking enemy forces.

I heard their cries, and the bellows of their beasts, and my own battle cry rose in my throat, but before it tore free hot tears of grief drowned my voice, my own grief and that of countless mothers across the eastern plains. I cursed my weakness, but tumbled no more stones. Let the armies of the Lords deal with any who survived. I would do only what must be done, and that would take all my strength and more.

I reached farther through the solid rock, and farther still. I found the caverns I had known and the places where enemy labor had joined them, and the far-distant openings onto the plains. I felt for faults, fulcrums of leverage, masses closest to imbalance. When all was in my grasp I gathered strength and Power, not mine alone but Ruald's and Rena's and all the Power of all the White Robes of Above, and channeled it into the heart of the mountains.

The rumbling surged past us in thunderous waves. Clouds of earth and rock dust rose in the distance, and all the water left in the basin rushed out at once despite my care, but I hardly knew. I was deep in the cataclysm, one small fragment tumbling among others in the maelstrom that filled the caverns and left the jagged line of peaks forever altered.

Some smallest part of me felt Ruald reach out, hesitate, then lift my inert form. After that there was darkness.

When light returned I saw Rena's white-robed arm, and then her face, but only as I reached into the stone floor beneath my pallet did I know that I was in the caves of Above, and home.

She bent to hear my whisper. "I will not bear the constriction of the Robe!"

There was laughter in her eyes. "And who, or what, would dare ever to constrict Steelwing?"

❄

CONNIE WILKINS lives in the five-college area of Amherst-Northampton, MA. She and her husband own two very eclectic retail stores which have provided well enough over the past twenty-four years to send their two sons to the major science fiction and fantasy conventions, and occasionally allowed time for them to go too.

Writing fiction was the one thing she always knew she'd do, long before getting a degree in English in 1965, but the challenges of family and business filled several decades. She's just getting into gear now, with a half-century of pent-up stories building pressure. "Steelwing" is the first to be published.

K.L. DARNELL has been a professional illustrator & calligrapher since 1981. In that time she has drawn everything from fiddle fine tuners to feet — from dancers to dinosaurs. Her favorite subject, however, is stones. She lives and works in East Lansing, Michigan, with her husband and daughter.

Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- 1st Place: **"Ivy" by Esther M. Friesner**
- 2nd Place: **"The Piper's Tale" by Laura J. Underwood**
- 3rd Place: **"Giorsal" by Patricia Russo**

Artwork:

- 1st Place: **Mark Harrison (cover) for "Ivy"**
- 2nd Place: **George Barr for"Running to Camelot"**
- 3rd Place: **Michael Kucharski for "The Piper's Tale" and Vincent Di Fate (interior) for "Ivy"**

Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine
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___#3 (Winter 1989) *The Adinkra Cloth* (a Nebula finalist!) - Mary C. Aldridge.
___#5 (Summer 1989) – "The Dragon Issue" *The Dragon, the Unicorn and the Teddy Bear* - Phyllis Ann Carr. Cover art by George Barr.
___#14 (Fall 1991) – *Black Ribbon* - Dawn Albright; cover by Gail Butler. *The Tengu's Scroll* - Dana Kramer-Rolls. *The Wuzzles* - M. Z. Bradley.
___#16 (Spring-Summer 1992) – *Never Look at a Gift Sword in the Horse's Mouth* - Jennifer Roberson; cover by Alan Gutierrez.
___#18 (Winter 1992) – *Arakney's Web* - Jo Clayton; cover by Nick Jainschigg. *The Black Tower* - Laura Underwood. *Queeneyes* - eluki bes shahar.
___#20 (Summer 1993) – *Cannibal Sorcerer* - Evangeline Walton & Bruce D. Arthurs. *Maiden, Are You Warm?* - Isabel Cole.
___#21 (Fall 1993) – *First Love, Last Love* - Tanya Huff. *Mages of Carthia* - Cynthia McQuillin.
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___#34 (Winter 1997) – *Thin Man* - Steven Piziks; cover by George Barr. Interview with Ellen Kushner.
___#35 (Spring 1997) – *Maiden Phoenix* - India Edghill; cover Vincent Di Fate. Interview with Susan Shwartz.
___#36 (Summer 1997) – *The Knife that Makes Men* - Mary Aldridge; cover by Alicia Austin and George Barr. *A Certain Talent* - Dorothy J. Heydt. Interview with Vincent Di Fate.
___#37 (Fall 1997) – *Grey* - Mercedes Lackey; cover by Nicholas Jainschigg. Interview with Octavia E. Butler.
___#38 (Winter 1998) – *Bisclavret* - India Edghill; cover by Margaret Davis. Interview with Lawrence Watt-Evans.
___#39 (Spring 1998) – *Escape Artists* - Susan Shwartz; cover by David Cherry. Interview with Connie Willis.
___#40 (Summer 1998) – *Ivy* - Esther Friesner; cover by Mark Harrison.

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INTERVIEW

An Interview With Nancy Springer

by Lawrence Schimel

Nancy Springer is the author of more than thirty books in many genres — fantasy, mainstream, mystery, etc. — and of many different kinds: novels for adults and for children, short story collection, collections of poetry, writings about writing, and more. She has won the Nebula Award, the Tiptree Award, and twice the Edgar Award for Best Mystery, in addition to many other honors.

I've had the pleasure of working with her in the past two years, when she contributed stories to my anthologies ***CAMELOT FANTASTIC, TAROT FANTASTIC, THE FORTUNE TELLER,*** *and* ***THINGS INVISIBLE TO SEE,*** *and have had the pleasure of reading her work for many, many years before then, and look forward to the years more to come.*

This interview was conducted as a "silent" interview, taking place in print over the course of a series of letters back and forth.

MZBFM: As someone who writes for both children as well as adults, I'd like to start by asking about your own childhood. Where were you born and where did you grow up? Many of your stories are so grounded in landscape and culture especially the Pennsylvania Dutch traditions and superstitions and small town life — were these part of your childhood or are they reflections of the current world you live in?

Springer: I was born in Livingston, NJ, in 1948, and lived there till age 13 in a little gray house near the Passaic river. My childhood was spent running wild in farmland and woodland, finding arrowheads, catching frogs and caterpillars and praying mantises, raising orphaned kingbirds, gathering pussy willow and wildflowers, trying to keep the dogs out of groundhog traps, encountering snakes, exploring the swamp, biking, bidding holes for no reason, and generally being caught up in an Edenic magic. But even as a child I noticed the housing developments closing in; I hated them. After my family moved away, the farm was sold. I returned once and saw the brook in a culvert, tract houses where the barn and fields had been, a four-lane running through the swamp. Broke my heart. I never went back. Angst for Eden lost has informed my life since then.

The Pennsylvania Dutch setting came later, after I married into a "Deutscher" family. Same with the small town life. There have been times when I have not particularly liked Pennsylvania small-town ambiance, but as a writer, wherever ya go, there you are.

Many of your YAs deal with complicated and difficult subjects, which are often considered "taboo" for children: homosexuality, guns, murder, etc. How do you decide whether to explore an idea as a young adult novel instead of one for adults? In what way is the coming of age story — a staple of both adult fantasy and almost all young adult literature regardless of genre — different depending on which audience you're writing for?

You're right, both fantasy and YA are frequently, perhaps fundamentally, coming-of-age genres, so my transition from one to the other was more natural than most people realize. Also, both are frequently, perhaps fundamentally, matrices for difficult subjects — the nature of good and evil, the problem of

Photo by Christine Valada

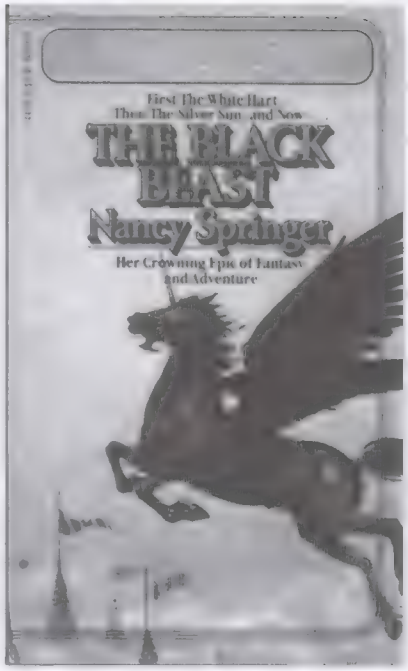
injustice, the place of the misfit, etc. The difference is that in fantasy the material is presented symbolically whereas in YA fiction the approach is usually more direct — racism is racism, not a struggle between yang and yin. Homophobia is homophobia. As to whether to present such material in YA form or as a novel for adults, I default to YA. Madeline L'Engle once said something to the effect that a writer who wants to deal with difficult topics needs to write for young people; most adults aren't interested. In my experience, she's right. Adults are reading **BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY**, with the exception of those who are reading science fiction and fantasy. When I write for adults, I write fantasy.

You write often about horses. Do you have one now? Did you have one growing up? Were horses — and horse myths — a part of your life, or do you love them because they were denied you?

Horses! Damn, I wish I were out riding instead of sitting at this computer, but it's raining. While I don't have a horse of my own right now, I am leasing one, an Arab with spirit and beauty *and* brains; who could ask for more? No, I did not have a horse when I was a kid; I bought my first horse when I was thirty-three. I can count on my fingers the times in my childhood when I rode horseback. Horses were a dream. I read every horse book in the school library. Now I write horse books and pre-adolescent girls read them and dream.

For years I've been trying to figure out why the horse — which, let's face it, is usually a smelly and unromantic animal — provides such a persistent, pervasive dream for so many people — usually girls and women — including me. I think it's because the dream combines so many seductive elements: There's freedom — mobility, the wind in the mane/hair. There's back-to-nature. There's power — the vicarious power of the rider, the strength and control. There's status — the rider is the person on the high horse. There's the hairdresser cult of beauty — let's brain that mane and tail. All these things were possessed by men once — the cults of knights and chevalier and cowboy — but have now been taken by women, while men have moved on to machines. And what's really interesting is how many girls are mad about horses, then move on to focus that same energy on boys and men. Riding a horse involves maintaining a relationship — love, diplomacy, discipline — with a living creature that is physically far more powerful than the girl in control. In other words, the horse is a sublimated man. And yes, there's a sensual or even a sexual element to horseback riding sometimes. Now I'm wondering whether men haven't lost something by transferring their affections to machines. Where have all the cowboys gone?

When did you begin to write? Your characters often are storytellers, or people who revere stories; were you always inventing stories for yourself and your friends as a child or was it only later in life that you began to create these narratives?



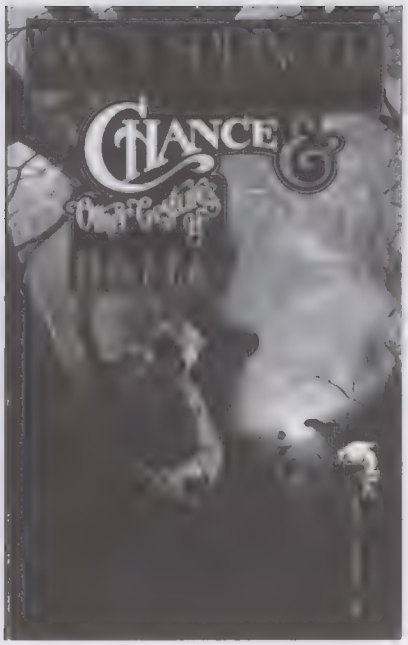
No, not when I was a kid. I kept notebooks during the summer when I was a teenager, and I collected vocabulary words and wrote book reports and I do remember writing one little story about elves or something but it was awful and I tore it up. And I do remember telling my mother an elaborate story once about a drawing I had made; the creatures standing around a rock were holding sticks to show that they were "truthtellers". But generally I was a silent child, mostly friendless and frequently asked whether the cat had got my tongue. My father was a bit of a storyteller; being Irish, he had a gift for the blarney. My father and mother used to say that I should write a book someday, but they were referring to the oddball events that took place at the small motel we ran. When I was a teenager I dabbled with writing, as I have said, but when I went to college I gave up all thoughts of writing because I was told that those who could write did and those who were jealous became critics, and I was already an excellent critic. Also it became obvious to me (please detect sarcasm here) from my courses that all great writers were hairily male and served in the armed forces in various capacities. And what had I ever done? Never bayoneted anybody. Never slaughtered a whale. Never even went on safari. I continued to feel that I had no authority to write until after college, newly married and so bored I was staying in bed until noon daydreaming. It occurred to me like the stereotypical blaze of light that I might be able to get away with putting the daydreams in a fantasy context; I wouldn't have to hunt lions to do *that*. So I started. Years later, I read Joanna Russ' wonderful essays and understood how many women before me and since have gone through the same process of wanting to write the Great American Novel but finding their true voice in one of the marginalized genres. So no, I wasn't a storyteller quickly or easily. But I sure am one now.

Who is your ideal audience? Is it different for different projects?

Ideal audience? An editor with an enormous cash surplus. Just kidding. The world at large, I guess. I know I'm supposed to think about the reader as I write, but honestly, I hardly ever do. I just write the stories so that the endings come out the way I want, and I am perpetually astonished and delighted to find that other people like my stories too. Any people will do — men in France or Japan, the woman next door, boys in an inner city school, a girl who loves horses, whoever. Maybe the reason I write so many different sorts of things is because I want that diversified audience.

Do you write for your own children, or write down stories you used to tell them?

No, not really. When my daughter was about twelve or fourteen she was my first reader for my kids' books, especially my horse books, and she was very helpful. And when my son



was ten, I think, he spent a summer reading and rereading the fantasy novels I had written up to that point. But that's pretty much the limit of their involvement. I read classic children's books aloud to my kids, but I didn't tell them stories — I storytell through my hands, not through my mouth. And now that my kids are grown and too busy to be interested in my stuff, I am a lot more free in my writing.

I know you write poetry, and you've written lyrics for songs in various books. Do you also sing? Do you write songs to be performed ever — by yourself or others?

Do I sing? Funny you should ask. Yes, I have always sung, and I used to have a good voice, although I never had any lessons. In my wildest adolescent dreams I wanted to be a rock star. The fact that I considered "rock star" male did not deter me from this fantasy, but it did deter me from attempting to realize it — that, and the fact that I got to college just in time for that odd hiccup in modern musical history called Folk. I learned folk guitar, grew my hair long, sang in coffee houses, and for a mercifully brief interval I played fiddle in a bluegrass band. (I was terrible.) After college I got married, had kids and sang to them. They liked the guitar but the dog howled when I tried to play my violin so I put it away. Largely, I sublimated my musical yearnings into my writing, trying to make the words sing. A few of my fantasy lyrics have been filked, but I've not yet done any serious songwriting.

Since you write in so many different genres and mediums, how do you decide whether an idea becomes a poem or prose, or does the work decide? Your poem "To Be a Hero" (available in ***YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR****) leaps to mind as an example of something that could have gone either way.*

How do I decide whether an idea is poem, prose, short or long or whatever? Usually I go at it the other way around; I give myself an assignment such as "I want to write a short story for Lawrence Schimel's new anthology." Then I troll through my idea files, mental or written, to see whether I can come up with one that suits. Some ideas are naturals for short stuff, others demand a novelistic treatment, and the trick is to know which is which, and also to know the cerebral ideas (brain farts) from the ideas that grab the heart. If there's nothing in particular I need to write, I'll give myself an assignment: "I've never written an epistolary story, so why don't I try one?" Then I'll try to come up with the right idea. In other words, I usually start with the form. Poetry is the exception; sometimes poetry presents itself simply demanding to be written for no good reason — which, of course, is the best reason of all.

What is the influence or impact, for you, if any, of writing both verse and prose? Do you borrow techniques from the other when you write? Do the two different modes help/hinder each other in your work: the compression of language in poetry, its freedom of image and metaphor, spilling over into your prose perhaps.

Writing both poetry and prose has, I hope, made me a better writer. I have taught writing many times, and whenever I encountered a student whose writing was flat and dead I would ask them to read and/or write poetry — and invariably they replied that they did not care for poetry. And I would say, "Yes, I can tell." In a sense, all of my writing is poetry. I met an academic once who said that the two basic divisions of writing should be conceptualized as verse and prose; that there is verse that is poetry and verse that is not, just as there is prose that is poetry and prose that is not. Whoa. It takes a real fundamental brain reorganization to buy into this, but if you try, it works. Have you ever wondered why people classify prose as "fiction" and "nonfiction" but they don't apply the same classifications to poetry? It's because poetry is not the other category; verse is. And verse can definitely be classified as fiction or non.

What about the difference in ideas within your fiction — that is, is there a different scope for a short story than a novel? And then, of course, there are novellas, which you've also written (such as ***DAMNBANA****).*

I read or heard somewhere once that writers are by nature either novelists or short story writers; that short story writers believe in epiphany (everything can change in a moment), whereas novelists believe in process (change must take place over a period of time). Given that, the treatment of time is key to the difference between a short story and a longer narrative. A few years back I became fascinated by the technique of pacing (the illusion of the passing of time in narrative) and by the different ways in which different people conceptualize time. They say that the reason why the years seem to pass faster as we age is because they do; time is a construct of the human mind. To some people it's minutes bleeding away, to some it's a stairway to heaven, to some it's an endless cycle of seasons and incarnation, to some it's entropy the size of the universe. I conceptualize time as a river with eternity as a vast pool. A short story is like a slice of the river, frozen. A novel is the river. I think I am by nature a novelist.

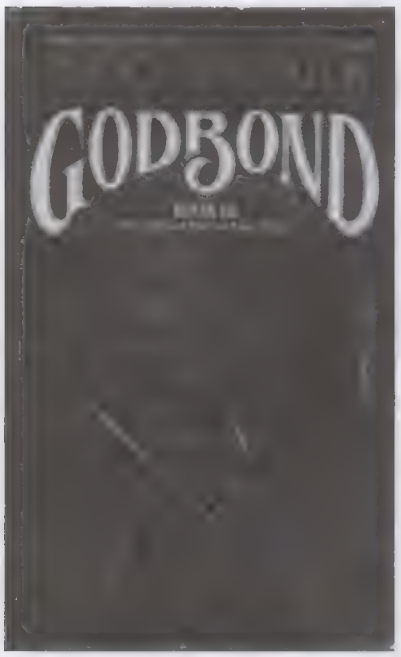
What are your writing habits? Do you treat writing as a job? Do you write regularly, on a certain time-frame? Do you write every day? Have you ever done anything else — held other jobs?

I write just about every morning, if only for a couple of hours. Yes, I try to treat my writing as a job, although it's hard to convince the neighbors that I do anything for a living. The only other jobs I've ever held were marginal; I was a library clerk when I was in college, and a teacher's aide for a year after I graduated, and then I stayed home, raised kids and wrote books. Within the past ten years or so I've taken to teaching occasional classes and seminars for pay, and at one point I was teaching

creative writing at York College four hours a week, but I gave it up — I love being in the classroom, but grading papers I hate like poison. Right now I work Sundays and two afternoons a week, not for the sake of the pay, but in order to get out of the house, be with people, and play with the power tools.

How does your family treat you as being a writer?

It's just what Mom does, that's all. On occasion I detect a hint of pride in my grown children, but they don't read my novels; they don't want to know what weirdness I'm thinking! In my experience, the better people know me, the less they perceive me as a writer and the more they interact with me simply as a human being, and that's the way I like it. Some years back I largely stopped self-promoting, although not as a conscious decision — I simply got tired of tooting my own horn, and I quit doing it. Now I'm "Nancy", not "the local author". And who the hell wants to be "the local author" anyway?

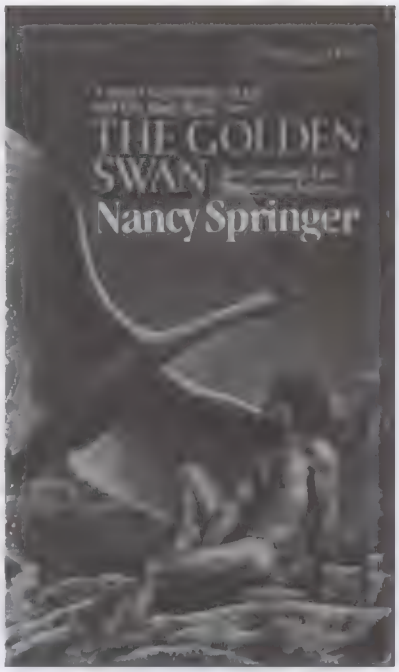


Is there a difference, for you, in the kinds of stories you choose to tell — high fantasy vs. contemporary fantasy? What I mean is in terms of the themes underlying the story, are these determined in part by the setting or can you explore the same regions of the human heart and psyche regardless of what genre you're working in?

Here's what happened: When I started writing, unbeknownst to me I was shipping out all my leftover childhood and adolescent emotional baggage via the books. Two years after something was written and published, I might reread it and say, "Oh! Now I understand!" Then I got smarter about the process and eventually, after ten fantasy novels, I more or less finished it. I'd been turning my attention inward for a long time, and now I wanted to turn my eyes outward. My editors still wanted fantasy. Writing contemporary fantasy seemed like a compromise at first, but soon took on a vitality of its own. About that time also I began writing the YA novels you mentioned earlier, dealing with difficult social topics — again, turning my focus outward. So no, I don't think that the different genres explore the same human material, though of course there needs to be some overlap; I'm sure my experience writing high fantasy has stood me to good stead throughout everything I've attempted since.

*And now you've returned to writing high fantasy in your latest novel, **I AM MORDRED**. Would you say this book looks inward or outward, as you just described, or some other combination or pattern, a mix of both somehow?*

Jeez, what a question! As it is necessarily based on the existing Arthurian material, I'd say that **I AM MORDRED** is less private than my fantasy has been in the past, more public. But it still reaches inward to my own experience of what it means to be an "oddling" — the book is dedicated "For oddlings everywhere". Although I mention homosexuality nowhere in the book, I was thinking as I wrote of the alienation of gay teens in today's high schools; Mordred's experience as the pawn of a self-fulfilling prophecy is different, yet similar.



*One of the major themes of **I AM MORDRED** is of trying to escape one's Fate, but finding that the very act of trying to avoid one's Fate is part of the Fate itself. This is a theme which has shown up in other ways in your work. Do you, personally, believe in Free Will? What is your own religious background, as a child and as an adult, and has this had much impact on how you view the world?*

My religious background. Hoo, boy. Up until my parents moved when I was thirteen, we all went to the Baptist church — "soft shell Baptist", my mother used to say. "NORTHERN Baptist". Be that as it may, I was raised with the idea that one must accept God as an "adult", at age 13, good old rite of passage time, although I doubt that anyone is mature enough at that age to buck the expectations of their church and family. Being Baptist also involved a great deal of hell and damnation. At age ten or thereabouts I said "damn" one day by mistake, knew I was going to hell, and decided on the spot that a God who would send a kid to hell for saying "damn" was a good enough reason to be an atheist. I did not have to test this position because we moved before I was due to be baptized, and after that, churchgoing was sporadic. I was not baptized until I married a guy who had been groomed for the Lutheran ministry. Lutherans believe in the grace of God, which is to say, God can save you if he has a mind to, whether you like it or not. Lutherans are less scary than Baptists but not nearly as interesting, except Swedish Lutherans, and Garrison Keillor has already been there. On the conscious level I am still an atheist, but I went to church all those years anyway, and on some level I think I believe in — I don't know what. Maybe one of these days the writing will figure it out for me.

*What, for you, are the joys and the frustrations of writing a new story in a familiar territory — the tales of King Arthur — as you've done with **I AM MORDRED**, in terms of the readers expectations and the struggle to say something completely original without losing the familiar elements that the reader is expecting and wanting?*

It was wonderfully challenging to deal with pre-Freudian material for a post-Freudian readership. Back when the Arthurian material originated, a villain was simply someone who was born evil or devil-possessed; no further elaboration was necessary. Mordred was conceived upon his father's sister; Mordred was unnatural, therefore evil. Case closed. But I — and, I hope, my readers — cannot think of anyone as evil at birth. And I couldn't change the ending either. So, how did an innocent child grow up to be this father-slayer, this doomster Mordred? How did fate and foreknowledge play upon and with psychology? What fun. I have been told by a reader that Mordred reminded him of Judas in ***JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR***, and I believe there is some

similarity; in both the Arthur and the Christ stories, the villain is more doomed, more fated, than the dying and reviving savior.

You seem to be reworking fairy tales as well, lately, such as your recent adult contemporary fantasy ***FAIR PERIL****, which delightfully retells "the frog prince", and a forthcoming retelling of "Rapunzel" titled, I believe,* ***PLUMAGE****. What is it about the archetypes of fairy tales, do you think, which so resonates for readers and storytellers, that we keep returning to them, and especially that we keep updating them and making them reflect our modern world?*

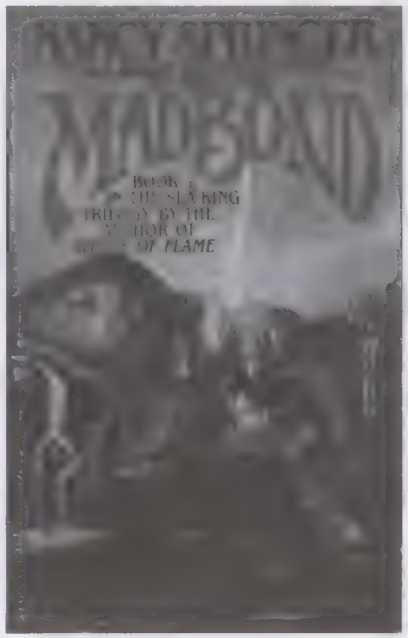
Yes, **PLUMAGE** is in the works, but it is only marginally about Rapunzel. It's not really based on fairy tale, either; rather, it's morphing out of miscellaneous thoughts about parakeets, birds in general, and mating rituals, and if it works it will be a minor miracle. But I do like to work with fairy tales. I recently wrote my own version of "The Goose Girl" for an anthology, and F & SF published my gender-reversed retelling of "Beauty and the Beast". I think part of the attraction of fairy tales is that they link readers and writers/storytellers with an instant commonality in our world of fragmented experience. The writer plays variations on an accessible theme, the reader experiences a flash of recognition and perhaps a resonance of childhood story time, and reader and writer clasp hands, so to speak; they are both children wandering in that timeless place that is way bigger than either of them. The reader comes right along with the writer even as the writer modernizes the tales. It's a different experience than sharing a purely personal vision, which may leave the reader shaking her head. Fairy tale makes a writer's personal vision more accessible to the reader.

A number of your more recent works — your novel ***LARQUE ON THE WING****, especially, but also in your books* ***LOOKING FOR JAMIE BRIDGER*** *and* ***FAIR PERIL*** *and your story* ***"Elvis Lives"*** *in* ***TAROT FANTASTIC*** *— have been great explorations about our preconceptions of gender, something which fantasy (and science fiction) affords particular advantages for writers to do. Have your own thinking about gender identity and sexual orientation changed over the years, or is this simply a product of looking outward instead of inward as you described that this is now an important theme in your work?*

Has my thinking about gender identity and sexual orientation changed over the years? You betchy. I began adult life with the usual prejudices and preconceptions, although I was never virulent about any of them. Until my early thirties I even tried to fit into the "wife and mother" role. I think things started to change when I started to publish novels, for two reasons: 1) I gained a sense of identity and self respect, including a sense that somebody else ought to do some of the dishes, and 2) I started going to science fiction conventions. I have never been one to label people, so it took me a while to notice that many of my favorite people came in same-gender pairs. Whoa. That and Ellen Kushner's **SWORDSPOINT** added a new dimension to my daydreams. I had always daydreamed about guys who were pals, and in a sense those guys were me, or aspects of me — a child of the fifties, I daydreamed myself as a male, because in the world I was raised in, boys had all the adventures.

You mentioned this earlier when you talked about wanting to be a "rock star" even though, for you, "rock star" was always male. Do you think of different story possibilities because of the restrictions or lack thereof imposed by the gender of your characters, or do you set out to thwart convention? How are things different for you when you write with male vs. female narrators? Do you tell different stories depending on the gender of the narrator?

Yes, I guess I do tell different stories depending on the narrator, or rather, the main character. Female characters are likely to lead me into gender issues. Heterosexual male main characters allow me to tell a more straightforward, mainstream story. (**TOUGHING IT**, for instance, would have turned out completely different with a female main character.) I guess it's not so much that I tell different stories depending on gender of the character as that I choose the gender of the character depending on the story I want to tell. Take it a step farther: I have toyed with the idea of taking a male pseudonym in order to write a mainstream bestseller. I tried it once, and it worked, in a way. Writing as "Seth Connor", a heterosexual male author, I became a member of the popular culture and produced a novel that accepted contemporary social values. But I couldn't maintain the stance. It was a "good" book, but I trashed it after the first three chapters.



Now that you've begun editing — the forthcoming anthologies ***RIBBITING TALES*** *(Philomel) of frog fantasies and* ***PROM NIGHT*** *(DAW) of fantasy stories about this magical coming-of-age moment — what is the process like for you and how does it differ, do you think, because you're primarily a writer? Does editing other people's work change or affect how you look at your own?*

Ah, yes, my life as an editor. I don't think it's affected my work, but it has certainly given me some insights. I've noticed that aspiring writers tend to think of editors as the opposition, the hard-hearted gatekeepers, the enemy withholding the much-idealized prize: publication. While I learned early to think of editors as the writer's advocate in the publishing house, even after years in the business I still regarded many editors as cognitive aliens, those weird people who lived in NYC and seemed to know nothing of real life west of the Hudson. But now that I've done some editing, I realize that an editor is just a writer turned inside out. Similar devotion to the craft, similar frustrations. Often, an editor *is* a writer wearing another hat; many editors do some writing, and many writers do some editing. I've

been astonished at how difficult it is to acquire enough quality material for an anthology. The writers I want, the ones who consistently produce competent stories, are too busy or priced out of my budget, and where are all the people clamoring to break in? When I opened **PROM NIGHT** to unsolicited submissions, I thought I would be swamped with material — but not so. I've received maybe forty submissions for an antho that requires twenty stories, and this after posting the guidelines in **THE GILA QUEEN'S GUIDE TO THE MARKETS**, *Speculations*, and online. I'm starting to think that commotion at the gate is caused mostly by hot air.

Do you have a writer's workshop? Have you ever been a part of one, and how do you feel about the influence of all those other people on one's work — both in general and/or as it relates to your own writing process?

I belonged to a writers' workshop years ago, 1980-85, when I lived in the Johnstown, PA, area. By that time I was already well published; what the workshop taught me was how much I already knew. By making me conceptualize and express my thoughts on writing, the workshop enabled me to move on in my writing and also enabled me to start teaching writing seminars — a lucrative sideline I had not considered open to me before. Discussing other people's work taught me so much that I would recommend it to every writer who hasn't done a lot of critiquing already; my only concern is that the writer being critiqued might actually take some of the advice which is offered. Listening too much, depending on the critique group too much, strikes me as a very bad idea, resulting in manuscripts that might as well have been written with a blender. A writer has to be sure of her personal vision and her personal voice, and even at the risk of making mistakes, I would not let anything take that away. If I were still workshopping, I would go in order to learn from the critiquing process in general, and in regard to specific suggestions concerning my work, I would smile, nod, say thank you, and listen only if something rang the DUH bell —DUH! Why didn't I think of that before?

What books are in the works for you now; what can we readers look for on the shelves a few years from now, once the publishing process catches up?

PLUMAGE, which we talked about earlier. A YA novel from Avon, **SKY RIDER**, about an angel on horseback. A YA series from Philomel, the first volume of which is tentatively titled **ROWAN HOOD OF THE ROWAN WOOD**, featuring the daughter of Robin Hood and her outlaw band. After that, who knows?

❄

NANCY SPRINGER — ENGLISH LANGUAGE BOOK EDITION LIST

in order of publication

1. THE BOOK OF SUNS, pb, Pocket Books, Jun 1977
   Nebula Nominee
   THE SILVER SUN, book #2 of the Isle series, pb, Pocket Books, Aug 1980
   Reissue, Dec 1985
   British pb, Corgi, 1984
   British hc, Richard Drew, 1984

2. THE WHITE HART, book #1 of the Isle series, pb, Pocket Books, Dec 1979
   Locus bestseller
   reissue Oct 1985
   hc Science Fiction Book Club
   British pb, Corgi, Jul 1984
   reprint, new cover, 1984
   British hc, Richard Drew 1984

3. THE SABLE MOON, book #3 of the Isle series, pb, Pocket Books, Feb1981
   reissue Feb 1986
   British pb, Corgi, 1985
   British hc, Richard Drew

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4. THE BLACK BEAST, book #4 of the Isle series, pb, Timescape (imprint of Pocket Books), Sept 1982
   Reissue Apr 1986
   British pb, Corgi, 1985
   British hc Richard Drew

5. THE GOLDEN SWAN, book #5/final of the Isle series, pb, Timescape, May 1983
   reissue 1986
   British pb, Corgi, 1985

***a Science Fiction Book Club hc, THE BOOK OF VALE, Sept 1983, combines THE BLACK BEAST and THE GOLDEN SWAN within one cover

6. WINGS OF FLAME hc, Tor, Apr 1985
   pb Tor Feb1986
   British trade pb, Arrow, Apr 1986

7. CHAINS OF GOLD, hc, Arbor House, Aug 1986
   pb Tor, Aug 1988
   British hc, Macdonald, Aug 1987
   British pb, Macdonald Futura, 1988
   Iowa State Best Books for Young Adults listee

8. A HORSE TO LOVE (mainstream juvenile) hc, Harper& Row, Mar1987
   International Reading Association Children's Choice

9. MADBOND, book #1 of the Sea King trilogy, pb, Tor, Jun 1987
   British pb, Futura (Orbit), 1988

10. CHANCE: AND OTHER GESTURES OF THE HAND OF FATE
    collection of short stories and novellas, pb Baen Books, Sept 1987

11. MINDBOND, book #2 of the Sea King trilogy, pb, Tor, Nov 1987
    British pb, Futura (Orbit) 1989

12. THE HEX WITCH OF SELDOM hc, Baen Books, Mar 1988
    pb, Baen Books, Mar 1989
    New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age

13. NOT ON A WHITE HORSE (mainstream juvenile), Atheneum hc, Mar 1988
    pb, Knopf, Jan 1990

14. GODBOND, book #3 of the Sea King trilogy, pb, Tor, Oct1988
    British pb, Futura (Orbit) 1990

15. THEY'RE ALL NAMED WILDFIRE (mainstream juvenile), hc, Atheneum, Apr 1989

16. APOCALYPSE pb, Baen Books, Aug 1989
    hc Underwood-Miller Nov 1989
    Nebula nominee

17. RED WIZARD (fantasy juvenile) hc, Atheneum, Mar1990
    Junior Library Guild main selection

18. COLT (mainstream juvenile) hc, Dial Books for Young Readers, Oct 1991
    pb Puffin, Feb 199

continued next page

Recorded Book, 1996
Joan Fassler Memorial Book Award, 1992
IRA Young Adults' Choice, 1993

19. THE FRIENDSHIP SONG (fantasy juvenile) hc, Atheneum Books for Children, March1992
Carolyn W. Field Award Notable Book

20. DAMNBANNA, Axolotl Press, paper, cloth, leatherbound,
1992 reprint: *Fantasy & Science Fiction* Magazine, Dec. 1992

21. THE GREAT PONY HASSLE (mainstream juvenile) hc Dial Books for Young Readers, June 1993
Puffin pb August 1996 0-14-037064-1 $3.99
Troll school book club edition 1997

22. STARDARK SONGS (poetry), pb & hc, W. Paul Ganley, 1993

23. LARQUE ON THE WING, AvoNova, hc February 1994, pb February 1995
Nebula nominee
James Tiptree, Jr. Award

24. THE BOY ON A BLACK HORSE (mainstream juvenile), hc, Atheneum Books for Children,
March 1994
pbTroll 1995
ALA-YALSA Best Book for Reluctant Young Adult Readers

25. METAL ANGEL, Roc, April 1994
Lambda Literary Award nominee

26. MUSIC OF THEIR HOOVES (juv. poetry) Boyds Mills Press, May 1994

27. TOUGHING IT (mainstream juv) Harcourt Brace, Oct.1994 simultaneous hc
Recorded Book 1996
ABA Pick of the Lists
ALA-YALSA Best Book for Reluctant Young Adult Readers
ALA-YALSA Best Book for Young Adults
Carolyn W. Field Award Honor Book
New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age
Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allen Poe Award, YA category

28. THE BLIND GOD IS WATCHING, Silver Salamander Press, Dec 1994

29. LOOKING FOR JAMIE BRIDGER (mainstream juv), Dial Books for Young Readers, June 1995
Recorded Book, 1996
Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allen Poe Award, juvenile category

30. FAIR PERIL, Avon, Nov.1996, simultaneous hc and trade pb
(mass market) pb July 1997
Science Fiction Book Club edition, 1997
nominee Mythopoeic Fantasy Award

31. SECRET STAR (mainstream juv), Philomel, May 1997

32. I AM MORDRED: A Tale from Camelot (fantasy juv), Philomel, April 1998
Star Forecast Publi*shers Weeklv*
Star review *Booklist*

MZB TALKS TO WRITERS:

Pet Peeves: Grammar I Learned in Fifth Grade

by Marion Zimmer Bradley

The MZBFM staff posted the following article by Marion on our web page, www.mzbfm.com, and solicited comments from readers.

Here is a collection of the mistakes in grammar I see most often. Reading slush today makes me aware of the advantages I had that children nowadays lack — a good grade school education and no television.

it's/its

This one gets first place because it's the mistake I see most often in my slush pile.

"It's" is a contraction of "It is". "Its" is the possessive form of "it" and does not have an apostrophe any more than mine, yours, his, hers, etc.

alright

There is no such word as "alright". The term is "all right".

lay/lie

"Lay" needs an object, i.e. "I lay the book on the table."

"Lie" does not, so it's "I lie down", or "I lay myself down".

less/fewer

If you can count it, it's "fewer". So you can have "less salt" or "fewer grains of salt". Despite what they say in advertising, you cannot have "less calories" — it's fewer calories, as all of us who count them know.

like/as

This is another one we can thank the ad agencies for. There used to be a slogan, "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should." (This, of course, in addition to being grammatically incorrect, is an oxymoron — any cigarette tastes terrible.)

After enough people protested that it should be "as a cigarette should" the ad agency came up with its next slogan: "What do you want — good grammar or good taste?" For me, definitely good grammar.

to/too/two

"To" is used as part of a verb or as a preposition (to go to the faire), "too" is used interchangeably with "also" or in expressions such as "too many", and "two" is a whole number greater than one and less than three.

I'll add other errors to the list as they start appearing enough to bug me. Please feel free to make your own suggestions for inclusion in this list. You can write to us at the magazine or e-mail us at mzbfm@well.com.

— Marion Zimmer Bradley

We received quite a few replies, including the following:

My pet peeve is the confusion in some minds on the usage of **"your"** and **"you're"**. When I see it used incorrectly, it makes me ill. The same thing goes for **"There"**, **"Their"**, and **"They're"**.

Steve Brown

Definitely to add to your list of "grammatical annoyances":

The misuse of **"your"** and **"you're"**.

Most commonly misused as "Your going to love this." "Your" is a possessive, and describes something that belongs to you, as in "your short story." "You're" is a contraction, short for "you are," as in "You're short, aren't you?" or "You're looking for trouble."

Neil Parker

I agree with your comments on grammar. I must point out, however, that even with the grammar book I had for college English, the past tense of **lay/lie** is confusing. Both the alternatives sounded wrong! So I used a tactic often resorted to in my math classes: read the instructions and plug in the terms and pray a little!

Karen Leonard

(Old enough to be disappointed in much modern writing, youngand dumb enough to try to write anyway.)

I don't profess to be wonderful at grammar, and certainly my spelling stinks, but these are my two infamous pet peeves... Do these errors bug you?

1) **"Towards"** instead of **"toward"**

2) The use of **"accept"** and **"except"** interchangeably

Susan (velvet1@erols.com)

Two grammatical errors which bug me are:

The wrong pronoun. As soon as objects of a verb double up many people use the wrong pronoun. The same person who will quite correctly say: "She gave it to me." or "I gave it to her." will fall apart and say "They gave them to she and I."

It comes from incomplete correction of such sentences as "Him and me went to the movies." The child is told that it must be "He and I", without any explanation. Ever after, the child will use "he and I" whenever two people are involved.

Plural pronoun for single person. Since the onset of Political Correctness, it is no longer acceptable to use the male pronoun in a general sense. To avoid "he or she", the PC affected writer will use "they". Our local auto club an-

nounced that a member must show "their" membership card. Either the club had a lot of schizophrenic members or had issued plural memberships, both of which suggestions were denied by the management.

I hope the above are of interest.

Bob Campbell
Freelance writer

I'm a long-time devoted reader.

May I add the following type of error to your list? "Would you like to go with **she and I**?"

No one says, "Would you like to go with she," or, "Would you like to go with I." So why on earth can't people use the correct form when there are two objects connected by "and"? 'Tis a mystery!

Jane Atherstone

I have another one to add to your list of mistakes:

Using apostrophes to make plurals

(or — "using apostrophe's to make plural's")

It's not "beanie baby's", it's "beanie babies". It's not "the Jones's house", it's "the Joneses" house". I have even had a writer use the term "her's" and "their's". (I'm wondering what this writer would have put for "his" — "hi's"?)

You've already covered "it's" — you certainly chose the right example to top the list!

Christina C. Russell
Editor, PLOT Magazine

The "pet grammar peeves" page will probably prompt a lot of "well good, someone's *saying* something about that one" responses. Not to mention angry memories of how Winston, in effect, actually put down grammatical thinking and writing (since obviously we're supposed to prefer good taste, no? — even if, as Marion notes, we're silly enough to look for it in a cigarette). Wasn't it Walter Cronkite who got in trouble with CBS for refusing to read "Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should" over the air because it was grammatically wrong?

For what it's worth, I substitute "the way" and see how the sentence comes out. "Winston tastes good, the way a cigarette should" is correct, so the proper word is *as* (adverbial). Likewise, "It happened just the way he said" merits *as*. But "Greg raced out the door the way a Lamborghini" is weird enough that *like* is clearly called for (adjectival, modifying "Greg". Note that if we put *would* or *might* after the clause, it would need *as*).

Thanks also for pillorying "alright". When a record album is entitled "It's Alright Now" and the WB presents a show called "Alright Already", we're in trouble.

Since y'all have invited other peeves, may I contribute my two Most Annoying:

and I / and me

Someone must have been obsessed with guilt for saying "Me and Gus went to the store" and getting called on it. Consider each part of the group separately. She didn't invite I but *me* to dinner, and when someone else is included, "She invited Cynthia and me to dinner." The prize wasn't awarded to *I* but to *me*, and when George gets one also, "The prize was awarded to George and me." Or, "My wife and I appreciate your gracious invitation to my daughter and me."

me, I / myself

Use a pronoun like *myself* when the object of an action is also its subject: "I could've kicked myself" or "She treated herself to six new books." It also provides emphasis: "I myself sent it." But when you need a pronoun for a group subject or object that doesn't fit these situations, it's a whole lot less awkward — as well as being correct — to say "Cheryl, Richard, and I went out" or "Address your angry letters to me or my editor (in that order)".

P.S. — Y'know, the Susan Shwartz Seremonial Slapping Salmon just cries out to be applied here: "Winston tastes good, like a **whap! whap!** cigarette should..."

Michael Spence

I loved your grammar pet peeves. This subject strikes close to home for me, because I edit (and write) computer courses for a training company. I also wrote grammar guidelines for two of the companies at which I've worked. Most people don't realize the simple mistakes that often are made in business documents. For example, some of our writers still have trouble with possessives.

Something frightening happened to me in the bookstore the other day. The staff of the bookstore had put up a handwritten sign that said, "Where do you want to go?" Yes, the word "to" was spelled correctly and used in the right context. But all day long, people kept telling the staff that it should have been spelled "too". The beleaguered staff was ready to change it to the incorrect spelling. Luckily, I came in the nick of time and told them it was correct. (This sounds like an episode from The Adventures of Super Editor.) Even as I did this, I had to argue with another customer about which word was correct. Why no one simply picked up a dictionary from the bookstore's numerous shelves and looked it up, I'll never know. But as I was leaving the store, much later, that customer saw me and called out, "You were right!" Maybe she did check a dictionary. And so Super Editor was vindicated...

Here are some more words that give people trouble.

Cannot — Many people spell this "can not". It should be spelled as one word unless you're stressing the negative.

Different from/Different than — Use "different from" in almost all cases. Use "different than" only when the "different from" construction is too wordy and awkward.

Farther/Further — "Farther" refers to a measurable distance of space or time. "Further" refers to less tangible measurements. The easy way to remember them — keep in mind that "farther" contains the word "far," which pertains to distances.

Only — Many people don't realize the importance of placing the word "only" in the right part of the sentence. In most cases, "only" should be placed immediately before the word it is modifying. Don't put the word "only" directly before a verb unless it is modifying that verb (which is rare). Otherwise, confusion could result. For example, if you write, "I only slay dragons," does that mean you only slay dragons — you don't talk with them or dine with them? Or does that mean you slay

dragons but you don't slay other creatures? (Anyway, writers should avoid using too many adverbs...)

Then/Than — "Than" is used for comparison. "Then" refers to time. (People confuse these often, but those could be typos rather than actual confusion.)

Here are a couple of words that probably won't apply to fantasy stories. I included them because they come up so often. Besides, you never know when someone will write a contemporary fantasy about a haunted grammar checker.

Affect/Effect — "Affect" is most often used as a verb meaning to influence or to change. When used as a noun, "effect" means a result or a consequence. "Effect" can also be a verb meaning to bring about.

Ensure/Insure — "Ensure" means to make sure of something. "Insure" should be used only when referring to the insurance business. Why do companies pay thousands of dollars for an ad, only to confuse these two terms, usually in an important heading?

Anne M. Marble

Ann, you'd probably enjoy reading **Swashbuckling Editor Stories**, a small-press anthology edited John Betancourt of Wildside Press (www.wildsidepress.com). — *reh*

Advice on Correct Pronouns:

Nominative	Objective	Possessive	Reflexive:
I	me	my, mine	myself
thou	thee	thy, thine	thyself
you	you	your, your	yourself
he	him	his, his	himself
she	her	her, hers	herself
it	it	its, its	itself
we	us	our, ours	ourselves
you	you	your, yours	yourselves
they	them	their, theirs	themselves

Examples:

I gave the book to her. I gave the book to myself.

It is my book. It is mine.

[archaic: "Mine eyes have seen the glory..."; "Thine is the Kingdom..."]

Elisabeth Waters, Secretary to Mrs. Bradley

(For a definitive discussion of "thee" and "thou", see Heather Rose Jones' article in FM issue #29, "What Didst Thou Say?", a "Writers Talk Back" column.)

How about "most unique"?

Bill Varner

Thank you for your grammar tips! Could you please include rules for comma usage in a future article? That, as well as what constitutes passive voice or passive verbs, seem to be the most misunderstood aspects of writing that my small critique group finds itself discussing again and again.

Thank you for your untiring efforts to help new writers learn the craft.

Eleta Malewitz

Actually, I think the subjunctive is even more poorly understood — when to say "was" and when to use "were". In general, the rule here is that if the statement is hypothetical, use the subjunctive — "when I was king", but "if I were king". Perhaps Marion can write a column about the passive voice. — reh

A few basic rules about **commas** are:

Use one to separate the halves of a **compound sentence**. A compound sentence has a subject and a verb, the word "and" or "but", and another sentence and verb. This comma is obligatory.

Example: "Darrell rode a black horse, and his wife followed on her dappled mare."

You may skip the comma between two **compound predicates** if the sentence is clear. "I watched as the elf opened the letter from Publisher's Clearinghouse and danced a jig on his porch."

Use a comma before and after a **phrase which is set off from the text**: "I moved here from Phoenix, Arizona, last year." "The bottle, full of glowing green liquid, stood on the table." "My griffon, Sandor, is three years old."

Use a comma before and after the **name of a person who is being addressed**: "Look at that, Susan!" ("Look at that Susan!" has an entirely different meaning — it implies that Susan is doing something extraordinary.)

I prefer to see a comma **before "and" at the end of a series**. In any case, items in the series are set off from each other by commas. Preferred: "Apples, pears, oranges, and tomatoes crowded the vendor's cart." Acceptable: "Green, red and yellow birds flew about." (But beware of implying a kind of grouping of the items before and after the word "and". My favorite bad example comes from a book dedication I heard about: "To my parents, Ayn Rand and God.")

In dialog, commas are required **at the end of speech**, inside the close-quotes, before a word or phrase meaning "said". Example: "Go on. You can climb the ladder. Just don't look down," Sam instructed George.

If the dialog sentence is a question, however, type only the question mark and then the close quote. "How are you feeling?" the doctor asked his patient.

If you find other situations regarding commas which puzzle you, let me know. — *reh*

Some topics received quite a few mentions.

"A lot" is two words, NOT ONE!!!! Nobody seems to believe me...

Meg (ARR0WMAGE@aol.com)

As a former English teacher, I've seen all of these and more. My personal pet peeve is **"alot"** as in "The research paper had alot of errors." Ouch.

Rebecca Day

How about **alot** and a lot? Or mistaking **your** for you're and are for our? My mother is an English teacher and she beat these rules into us early. I'm always eager to help in the correction of this world's insane views on grammar.

Sarah Walsh

A few things I've run into in proofing for other writers (and these really bug me):

Alot instead of a lot

Nite/tonite instead of night and tonight (and any of the other creative spellings for words)

Steve Fox/Shari Mann <moobeast@sprintmail.com>

*I used to think there really **was** a word spelled "donut". — reh*

Thought of another item — reminded of it, actually, since it was lettered on the back of a truck we were following. Do you get a lot of MSS with **"alot"** as one word rather than two? I see it distractingly frequently, but don't recall (and would rather not have) its being incorporated into the language.

Michael Spence

I felt the need to add to your list of grammar woes. I teach high school and I am amazed how often **"their"**, **"there"**, and **"they're"** are confused.

I hope the writers of your papers use them correctly.

Cathleen A. Cody

I was reviewing your webpage and read your bad grammar section and thought I would send my favorite grammatical pet peeve: **their - they're - there**. I am amazed at how frequently these three words are substituted for each other. Thanks for the time, love your mag.

Roy (Royboy40@aol.com)

affect/effect

Affect is a verb, effect is a noun. If I affect something, I have an effect on it. **Not** the other way around. They may sound the same, depending on where you grew up, but they are different words.

Jenn Vesperman

(Just to complicate our lives, psychologists use "affect" (pronounced Æf-fect) as a noun, to mean something roughly equivalent to "mood". — reh)

The use of "I" where "me" should be used, e.g., "I did this for you and I."

Confusing e.g. with i.e.

E.g. means "exempli gratia" (if memory serves me correctly), or "for example".

I.e. means "id est", or "that is".

"Administrating". The word is administering.

Using an apostrophe-s for a plural. For example, "Johnny got some more burger's."

Dangling participles and misplaced modifiers, e.g., "Kevin pressed the green button causing the explosion that blew up the house which turned out to be the wrong button."

Don Muchow

(But dangling participles can be so much fun — for the reader who discovers their unintended hilarity!— reh)

I have a grammar irritant to add to your list. I object to the use of the noun **"impact"** as a verb. Certain popular sources use it this way all too frequently. Even some dictionaries have begun to list "impact" as a verb. It is a noun.

Christopher Koehler

*The late Terry Carr (known sometimes as "Conan the Grammarian") insisted that **loan** was a noun, **lend** was a verb. — reh*

Don't verb your nouns. Former Secretary of State Alexander Haig did this frequently, but only Ed Bryant could ever make me like it. (Ed roller-skated — in a tuxedo — onto the Hugo Awards stage at the Denver WorldCon in the early 80s and proceeded to give a hilarious speech lampooning the Haig style.)

Don't use long words when short ones will do. "Usage" can often be changed to "use". A "visitation" is probably a "visit". Remember that "everyday" means "ordinary".

Don't depend on your spellchecker; it won't catch the error when you typed "form" when you meant "from", or "you" when you meant "your".

Be aware of homonyms (compliment, complement; sight, site) and quasi-homonyms (adverse, averse; wangle, wrangle; loose, lose), and make the correct choice. My favorite recently was the manuscript that talked about visiting a dragon's "layer" and seeing its "horde" of gold and gems. Confusion between "rein" (direct a horse) and "reign" (rule) also seems frequent.

Know what compound words are (keyring, birthright) and when to use them, and check the dictionary if you're not sure which ones need a hyphen in the middle ("six-year-old", "life-size"). Some phrases("back up") are two words when they're verbs, and a compound (backup) when used as an adjective or noun.

For a longer list, try my article on manuscript preparation and copy editing in **THE PORTABLE WRITER'S CONFERENCE**, edited by Steve Mettee for Quill Driver Books.

Rachel Holmen

I'm very pleased by the volume of responses. Thanks to all who took the time to write in. Perhaps grammar education isn't as dead as I had feared!

— Marion Zimmer Bradley

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WRITERS TALK BACK:

Death, Taxes, and the Writer

by Elisabeth Waters

[While I, as a writer, am most familiar with the rules for writers, much of this applies to artists and other self-employed independent contractors as well. Bear in mind that I am neither an accountant nor a lawyer, and if you have questions, by all means consult the appropriate professional.]

omeone once said that the worst thing that can happen to a small business is success. In a way, that's true. When you sell your first story — even before you get the dents out of the kitchen ceiling where your head hit it while you were jumping for joy — you have just become a small business. Failure to realize this can have serious adverse consequences, both for yourself and your loved ones (or your heirs, at any rate, regardless of the degree of affection you bear them).

There are two basic ways to treat writing income, and Mrs. Bradley uses both. If you sell a story to the magazine, you are paid a one-time fee for the rights. This is *non-employee compensation*, and is reported in Box 7 of Form 1099-Misc if it's $600 or more in any year (or on Form 1042-S if you don't reside in the US).

If you have sold a story to **SWORD & SORCERESS** or any of her other anthologies, you are paid an initial amount as an advance against royalties. Then, after the book earns out its original advance, or when it sells overseas, or whatever, you get royalties. All of this, including the advance, is considered to be *royalty* income, and is reported in Box 2 of Form 1099-Misc (or on Form 1042-S) if it's $10 or more in any year. This gets a little tricky when you go to do your tax return (and a lot of computer software programs won't handle it at all), because these royalties are from work you did yourself, so instead of going on Schedule E (Rents and Royalties), they go on Schedule C (Profit or Loss from Business). If you die and your husband inherits your royalties, *he* puts them on Schedule E, but *you* don't. Non-Employee Compensation always goes on Schedule C. This has the advantage that you can deduct expenses such as paper, envelopes, postage, books, travel to conventions to promote your work, etc.

It has one major disadvantage, however, which often comes as a nasty shock on April 15 (for those of us who don't file our taxes in February to get the job over with). When your net earnings are $400 or more in any year, Self-Employment Tax (Schedule SE) kicks in. Basically, this is *both* halves of Social Security/Medicare. If you weren't expecting this and didn't set aside money for it; you've got a problem. But, even if you don't have the money, FILE THE RETURN! The penalty for failure to pay is .5% per month of the tax due to a maximum of 25%. The penalty for failure to *file* is 5% per month of the tax due to a maximum of 25%. This is 10 times as much, and it gets bad fast. And that's just penalty; there's interest as well. So file your return. You can negotiate an installment plan with the IRS, using Form 9465 (Installment Agreement Request). I know of one case where a family tried to ignore the whole situation; they almost lost their house to the US government.

If you are making a lot of income from writing and you have a day job, you can have extra tax withheld from your salary, which is what I do. If you don't have a day job, you need to make Quarterly Estimated Tax Payments (Federal Form 1040-ES, and check your state and local requirements as well). The form comes with instructions, including instructions on how to avoid penalties, but it does rather assume you can predict what your income is going to be. There's not much you can do besides (a) use your best guess, or (b) use a figure higher than you can imagine earning and get a refund when you file your taxes. There are some "safe harbor" provisions, but if your taxes are that complicated, I'd get an accountant. (Personally, I've had one for years.)

So much for taxes; now let's consider death. Whether you've sold to the magazine or an anthology, you still own the copyright to your work, and this copyright and any income it generates are part of your estate. You should have a will specifying where this money should go. We have three cases where we are paying royalties to the heirs of the person who wrote the original story. We also have one ghastly case, still pending, where the writer had no will, a wife from whom he was legally separated but to whom he was still legally married, and several children, only one of whom was his wife's, and not all of whom had reached the age of majority. On the instructions of our lawyer, we're holding his royalties while we wait for the setting up of a trust to protect the interests of the minor children. (I have a special file, just for this one author.)

If you don't have a will, *please* make one, and have it include instructions for your executor to get in touch with us. This is like notifying me when you move; if I can't find you, I can't pay you; and if I don't know who is supposed to get your royalties when you're no longer around — well, what do you expect me to do with them? This may seem silly if you're young and healthy, but accidents can happen at any age.

Writing (or drawing, painting, photography, music, or any other creative endeavor) may be an art and a joy, but as soon as you're paid for it, it's a business. You — and your heirs — will be much better off if you realize that. ❄

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Sunday 25 Oct, 2-4pm
Chelsea Quinn Yarbro signs her new Saint-Germain novel, **BLOOD ROSES**, and the two Mycroft Holmes books, **AGAINST THE BROTHERHOOD** and **EMBASSY ROW**

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Shadders

by Carrie Martin

"How you be, Dumpling, how you be?" That was the only ways Mrs. Beaudeaux ever told me how do, even from the first when I stood on her doorstep in my brand-news, whistling fine to look at. Knowed afore I opened my mouth I was spirit kin, she did, and my lonesomeness took a big jump back seeing that light smiling behind her eyes. Never heard more'n a "morning, sir," or "evening, ma'am," out of her for anybody else, with a bit of a nod if she was feeling particularly fine. I knowed she was what my ma would call right folks, the sort of woman what wouldn't step her big toe out of doors without she had on a good dress, stockings, lipstick, and hat. No proper woman went running down to the corner grocery after bread or a quart of milk wearing slippers. No more'n she'd tell secrets in odd corners nor Judas kiss her friends.

"I'm B'lind," I said, and stuck out my hand to collect her spindly fingers. "Belinda Margay."

"Mrs. Beaudeaux," she said. Bo-DOO was how she framed it, brow jumping up at the last like it was a surprise finding herself named so. "Reckon you's needing a room, then, B'lind. No cause elsewise tapping at such a fancy-schmancy door." She rolled her eyes saying such and I laughed.

"Heard tell you had a big empty attic, Mrs. Beaudeaux, and wouldn't pay no mind to a body cutting a hole in the roof for a skylight."

The brow went up again, slow this time, like she was studying on the surprise. "Do tell." The door swung wider and she stepped back. "Let's get our dickering in off the street, Dumpling. You got a taste for hot biscuits and marmalade?"

We sat in her spit-shined kitchen and feasted while she told me how her Mr. had plunged them eternally into debt buying an old mansion and carving it up into apartments some two years afore the neighborhood officially became a slum. "Still," she confessed, her lips trembling in the whisper of a smile, "had the luck to find hisself with a faulty ticker. One of them screaming fits of his carried him right off." The woman sipped at her tea, gazing fondly at faraway. "I was a right handsome young widow, B'lind. Made for certain comforts, and me too clever by then to fall into 'I do-ing' again." One eye closed in a wink. "Something to thank the good Lord for in a charmer what showed his true and nasty colors afore fetching hisself into an early grave."

"You ain't much of a romantic, Mrs. Beaudeaux." Not being much for general foolishness myself, I said it gentle like.

Her eyes rested gravely on mine for a bit and I suspicioned her secrets wasn't all in the past. "Ain't saying nothing 'gainst romance, B'lind. Nine times in ten it ain't romance kindling the urge in a man to hogtie a woman and plaster his name on her."

Sad strangled a sigh out of me. I was twenty, and had friends my age wed a year or two what looked a tired thirty. Didn't never strike men in the same way. They aged all right in their own living rooms, belching and scratching and working on their beer bellies, glued to the TV sets. But they shore spruced up fast enough when it was time to go bird watching with the other fellers.

Mrs. Beaudeaux started cleaning up the table, shushing me back to my chair when I got up to help. "So, B'lind. Why you aiming on putting holes in my

roof? Not to mention walking up three flights to bed when I got an empty room up one."

For answer I pulled a pencil out of my sock and reached for a napkin, being the only paper in sight. By the time the last dish tucked into the cupboard, I had her likeness. She smiled when she saw, which is more than most will do. Folks like themselves smoothed and prettied, and whatever gift flows through my arm insists on the truth my eyes is seeing right then.

"I knowed you was special, B'lind." Her speech was almost reverent, and her eyes never left the napkin. "You want the attic for the space, that it? And them holes for the light."

My happiness flowed up through my chest and out to embrace her. "I got me a scholarship, Mrs. Beaudeaux. They's paying for the schooling, and for supplies — anything I want, nearly — canvas and paints and what all. Allowance for living, and expected I'd choose close to campus, but you're asking less, so there's extra for making skylights and having all that space. Bus comes a block away, with time for thinking on the ride."

The woman's eyes met mine and I knowed she'd care for me like my own ma. Maybe better, having nary another chick to cluck over. Proved better than anything I coulda wished. She had them skylights inside a week, insisted anybody climbing three flights to the attic got board as well as room for the price, and took to meeting me at the bus stop with a flashlight if I came home after dark, or an umbrella if the sky was spitting. The last was a real gift, wet making her rheumatiz act up something fierce. I never felt so loved in all my life as hobbling home with Mrs. Beaudeaux.

Mighta been heaven, weren't for Professor Hilton. I'd feel that gift surging strong and smooth through my arm, flowing the truth of what I saw out onto canvas. Weren't never good enough for him. "No, no, no!" he'd shout, grabbing at his hair in frustration. "Miss Margay, you might as well get a camera and snap away. An artist doesn't paint what he sees. He paints something beyond. Can't you understand?"

I eyed the bowl of vegetables in the center of the room. "Ain't nothing much beyond squash and beans and tomatoes, Professor. 'Cept dinner maybe, and if you want me to paint a family of well fed, I'll be happy to."

He did three quick turns, putting me in mind of a flea-bit dog trying to bed down for the night. He stooped before me, hands clasped, and I almost feared he'd go on his knees in prayer. "Miss Margay, I want you to see in and through the squash. See the seeds nestled in its center, warm and moist, huddled together like babes. See the squash left to rot in the field, the seeds browning and hardening, suffering through the winter. See them buried, despairing, then rising with new hope and strength in the spring. See all of humanity, all of life in that squash before you. Can you do that?"

I looked hard at the professor, then I looked hard at the squash. "You want me to paint a big garden?"

He groaned as if mortally wounded and turned away. "Damn it. You're so talented and such an idiot." He swiveled and pointed an accusing finger at me. "You've got no soul, Miss Margay, and you'll never be an artist until you find one."

Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

That stung. "I'm Christian, born and bred, Professor Hilton. Baptized right and proper. Ain't never committed no mortal sin, so you got no call saying I ain't got no soul. Have too, and Jesus loves me."

He put a hand over his eyes and I watched his toe tapping ever so slightly while he counted to ten. He dropped his hand with a heavy sigh. "What does your soul look like, Miss Margay?"

"Can't nobody see a soul, Professor Hilton. 'Cept God, maybe."

"Well, you'd better ask God to let you have a look, Miss Margay, or you won't amount to anything in the art world."

I thought maybe that was blasphemous, but Mrs. Beaudeaux said he likely didn't mean it to be. "Some folks have a hard time saying what they mean, Dumpling. Men, specially."

"What's he meaning, then?"

She shrugged, sipping her tea. "Don't know, but I'm figuring God knows, and what's more, God knows what He wants to do with you, B'lind. Feels right, being here and going to that Professor's class, don't it?"

"That it do," I said sadly. "Just ain't having near as much fun as I figured on."

"Hard times feed the good, they say. I know I never —" Mrs. Beaudeaux jumped up suddenly, grabbed the flyswatter, and swung furiously at the end of the table. "Them damn shadders again."

I hadn't seen anything to begin with, nor nothing squashed beneath her swatter. "Shadders?"

"Can't see 'em but out the corner of your eye, B'lind. Getting worse, though. Swear I got a nest in that Mr. Shadrack's room. Says he don't see a thing, but he couldn't find his own head if it wasn't attached to his shoulders, right alongside his arms."

I squirmed on my chair. "Ain't never heard tell of shadders, Mrs. Beaudeaux. Not so's you'd go chasing, anyways."

"Never did myself afore, B'lind, but these is driving me something batty. Can't say why. Not like they bite or nothing. Just a feeling, like."

I wondered if Mrs. Beaudeaux was getting funny, like my uncle Joe done some years since. Stayed nice as ever, but took to wearing aluminum foil on his head. Kept the rays off his brain, he said. Old people get like that sometimes. No harm, really. I promised I'd keep a sharp eye out and give them shadders a stomp was I to see any.

A week later rain brought Mrs. Beaudeaux and her umbrella to the bus stop. Couldn't think for a bit what was different. Struck me of a sudden halfway home and I stopped right there in the rain. "You're walking sound, Mrs. Beaudeaux. Better'n I ever seen, wet or dry."

She nodded, her lips held in a tight line, and pulled me back under the umbrella. We walked in silence for a while, then her voice slid worried into the dark. "Ain't got a twinge from the waist down, B'lind. Everything upwards telling me right sore rain, but fine as fine below. Don't remember feeling so good as a girl, even."

"It's a miracle, Mrs. Beaudeaux."

"Ain't no miracle I asked for, B'lind."

We reached the house and I shook out the umbrella while she fumbled with the key. "Maybe God's healing the rheumatiz, Mrs. Beaudeaux. It'd be nice having your hands feel fit again, wouldn't it?"

She didn't answer until we was seated at her kitchen table over steaming cups of tea. "I don't say it ain't nice feeling like I could kick up my heels, B'lind, but it don't seem natural. Don't feel right, somehow."

"You just have to get used to it, Mrs. Beaudeaux." She didn't look any less worried, but I wasn't about to let anything spoil my mood, and I couldn't see that suddenly feeling strong and healthy — if only from the waist down — was a problem.

She studied my face after a moment, then smiled. "You're sitting on a secret, Dumpling. You thinking of sharing?"

Laughter rolled up from my middle. "Professor Hilton's put me on the list."

"The list?"

I pushed my cup aside and leaned

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forward to take her hands in mine. "He takes half a dozen students to the City every year to tour the big galleries and museums. Here he's been telling me all semester I'm hopeless, but he put me on the list. A whole week, and after gadding about in the galleries all day, we got them fine restaurants. I'm scholarship, so I don't have to pay a dime, and I heard tell there's even dancing in some of them restaurants. Guess so's you can kick up your heels and make room for dessert if you went too fondly after the main course."

Mrs. Beaudeaux's eyes shone and I could see her wandering back down through the years. "Dancing! Oh, there was never one like me, B'lind. Wait — I'll show you somewhat."

The old woman skipped away light as a feather and waltzed back a few moments later hugging a dress to her front. She twirled around me, the skirt of the gown flying, then stopped, eyes gleaming. "What you think of that, B'lind?"

I jumped up and planted a kiss on her withered cheek. "Ain't never seen nothing more beautiful, Mrs. Beaudeaux. Land, how folks musta stared when you went twirling 'cross the floor. Can't complain about a miracle giving that back to you."

Coulda bit my tongue for that. She sank into her chair with a sigh, smoothing a knobbly hand over the pale green taffeta. "I'd forgot how wonderful it is moving like that." She shook her head decisively. "Still, ain't natural, and it don't feel right, somehow." The trouble slid down and away as her eyes caught mine again. "You got a hankering to borrow it, Dumpling?"

A vision of myself flying, spinning amidst a crowd of polished city folk filled my head. I'd never thought myself particularly agile, but this dress was like to send the most awkward girl floating upon graceful seas. Bereft of speech, I nodded.

Mrs. Beaudeaux jumped up laughing. "We'll jest touch it up, Dumpling." She had the iron out half a shake later and laid the skirt over the end of the board. When the iron warmed, she touched it to the fabric and we both jumped back in shock as half the dress evaporated afore our eyes. Not so much as a sizzle nor a puff of smoke. Put me in mind of once when my sister Maddy and I plucked strands of hair and held them toward a candle. Didn't even need the fire — the heat alone was enough to shrivel them hairs to nothing in less than a blink. This was just that fast. One second, a beautiful dress. The next, half a dress with raggedy edges close to the waist. Bottom half underneath the board was gone, too, and that hadn't been nowhere near the heat.

Mrs. Beaudeaux unplugged the iron and we sat us down in the kitchen chairs. Mighta been ten minutes afore either of us said a thing. Kept trying to think how something like that could happen, I guess. It was only later I got to thinking about the disappointment of Mrs. Beaudeaux losing that wonderful dress she'd kept all those years.

"Well," she said finally. "Well."

I couldn't think of nothing to reply to that, and after a bit, I gave her a hug and kiss and took myself off to bed.

If Professor Hilton expected that trip to hand me some kind of art soul, he had a disappointment in store. His temper held up real nice, though, and he declared he could see something was working its way around inside me. Wasn't the art doing that, but I didn't know how to tell him I was fretting over a green taffeta dress and wondering if Mrs. Beaudeaux was right feeling anxious about the rheumatiz miracle. Found myself looking for shadders, which of course I saw out the corner of my eye, as can anybody. Nothing more than tricks of light and such. Nothing you can stomp on nor swing a swatter at.

Came home to hear the piano going. Knew afore I got the door opened what had happened. I stood listening for a good half hour. Mrs. Beaudeaux suddenly realized I was there and turned. Tears was streaming down her face and she wrung graceful hands together. "Ain't natural, B'lind, but I couldn't

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help playing. Never thought I would again, and I'm that glad, but it scares me." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I'm better than I ever was before. Without practice, and I'm better."

I sat down, eyes darting back and forth toward the corners. "You just forgot how good you was, Mrs. Beaudeaux."

Poor sweet woman put her face in her hands and sobbed hard for a bit, then collected herself like a fisherman drawing in his nets, hard weight pulling at tired muscles, knowing there's no more eating without. Shoulders back, chest out, standing full height — which was greater than when I'd met her, what with her spine straightening and all. "I know what I know, B'lind. What's more, so do you. This ain't natural. Don't know what's ailing me, but it's all wrong. You got to promise me you'll do the right thing when it comes to you what the right thing is. I'm thinking maybe I won't know, or else I won't find myself able. Promise me, B'lind."

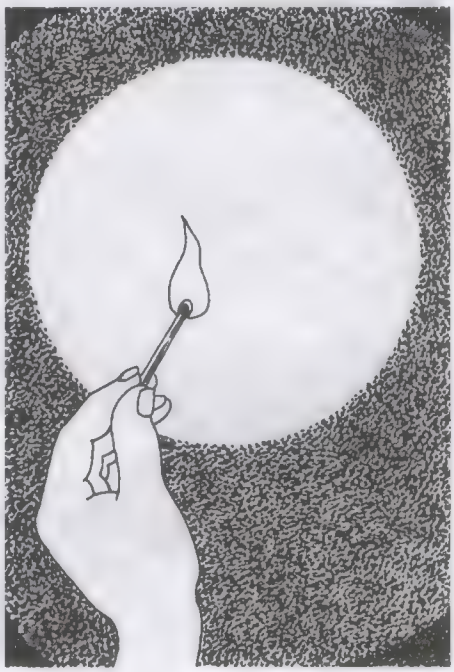
I wanted to say she was being downright silly. Wanted to say how could a baby like me know the right thing if she didn't herself? Wanted to tell her there wasn't going to be nothing right for me to do because there weren't nothing wrong. Instead I just looked in them fierce, tired old eyes and nodded just as solemn as if I'd put my hand on the Bible and oathed.

Next morning I thought to sneak out without breakfast, having no stomach for it. Mrs. Beaudeaux was in the front hall, fixing flowers in a vase. I started working my excuse, but she gave me a nod afore I could speak, and said, "Morning, Miss."

Don't know how I made it to the bus stop. Wasn't thinking of going anywhere — just knowing I couldn't stay where I was. I sat shaking in the back of the bus and went 'round and 'round with it in my head. I wished I could think I'd done something to make Mrs. Beaudeaux angry, make her want to punish me. The simple, horrible truth was that she didn't know me. That is, she knew who I was, if somebody was to ask her my name. I knew to my bones she'd be able to say, "Belinda Margay, attic apartment." She just didn't remember I was her friend. Didn't know I was her adopted chick. Couldn't sing her gentle "Dumpling" into my ears.

The driver stopped the bus and walked to the back where I sat like a log. "Look, Miss, you're going to have to get off. This is my last time around. You don't want to spend the night in the garage."

I'd spent the whole day, then, and didn't feel no better than when I'd started out. I dragged home, glad to hear the piano. It meant I wouldn't have to endure, "Evening, Miss." I woulda sworn I never slept a wink that night except for having the nightmares. Shadders creeping up the stairs, whispering along the hallway, gobbling up the corners of my room. I was almost surprised to see the sun shining through my skylights next morning.



A week staggered by, grief bludgeoning my fear. There was times the stabbing hurt of Mrs. Beaudeaux's vacant, unrecognizing gaze was so severe I wished I could believe in her shadders, wished they'd come smother me in the night.

I suppose I went back to school for not knowing what else to do. Professor Hilton kept pestering me to paint. I'd shake my head hopelessly, unable to tell him my trouble. He became increasingly earnest. "Anguish is written on your face, Miss Margay. Paint it."

Anger leaped through me, waving its red flag behind my eyes. "You think it'll make me feel better?"

He shrugged, excited. Happy. "Who cares? Art isn't about feeling better, Miss Margay. You simply feel. Put it on canvas. Find your humanity. Find your soul."

I hated him. I longed to scratch out his hateful eyes, slash away his dreadful smile, crumple his haughty, know-it-all face. I began his portrait that night for the pleasure of doing just that. Wouldn't harm him none but I figured I'd find it soothing.

Professor Hilton's likeness flowed out sure and smooth from my frantic fingers. I could feel them shadders watching me while I worked, flitting dark, nothing eyes from the eaves, from between the floorboards, from the crack between the door and the floor. Come on then, I dared them.

I couldn't get the cap off a tube of paint. I cursed, angry having my flow impeded. Half my brushes went scattering on the floor afore I found a box of matches. Trembling with a cold the room never felt, I burned my fingers lighting the first match. The second was better, and I held it to the neck of the tube, so's to melt the hardened oil. The cap held stubborn, and I lit a third match, striking the head against the leg of the easel. The easel vanished and my canvas crashed to the floor. I stared open-mouthed until the flame burned my fingers.

My heart pounded dully in my chest as I sat, trying to get my thoughts to line up and behave themselves. Shadders. Green taffeta. Rheumatiz gone right along with "How you be, Dumpling?" When morning peeked through my skylights, I got up stiffly and found my box of matches. I blackened a spot at the foot of my bed, then bubbled the varnish on the dresser. A third of my paintings vanished as I laid the match to them. Part of the floor as well. I sat again and blackened the toes of my shoes. Stopped when I felt my flesh smarting from the heat.

I waited. Counted the tenants as I heard them leaving. Went down one flight of stairs and lit another match. The banister disappeared. Went down another flight. My match took out two thirds of the steps and part of the wall. All sudden as sudden. No sound, no smoke, no nothing.

I knocked on her door. Do the right thing, B'lind. The right thing, Dumpling. Promise me. Mrs. Beaudeaux answered the door. "Yes, Miss?" I lit the match.

The firemen found me sitting 'cross the street, watching the blaze, sobbing my heart broke. Found it a mystery how it went up so fast. I coulda told

Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

them. Less than half a house to burn what with all the shadders had thought to nibble at. Made some big investigation, what with not finding Mrs. Beaudeaux and that Mr. Shadrack never coming home. Sifted through and thanked the good Lord at finding no evidence of a body being inside, though no one could tell what became of Mrs. Beaudeaux. Maybe her and that Shadrack feller run off together, some said.

Scholastic board said it was a shame, a young artist losing all her work like that. Couldn't decide what to do with them rules about continuing scholarships based on work done 'til Professor Hilton spoke up and saw I got money for the next term. Told me on the side the fire hadn't destroyed nothing valuable 'cause I hadn't painted nothing up there worth a hill of beans. But he sponsored my first showing a year later, and ain't one bit surprised my work's deep enough to impress the critics.

I don't know what Mrs. Beaudeaux's shadders were, though I been reading ever since on anything like I could get my hands on. Maybe they was some alien creatures from a far star, maybe some dread thing rising out of our own familiar night, maybe some strange cancer sprung from human bone. Copiers. Eating up and replacing perfect in every respect. Better than perfect, maybe, thinking of how Mrs. Beaudeaux declared those hands and legs worked better than when she was a girl. Except they was still shadders after all's said and done, vanishing away without so much as a wisp of smoke.

The good professor goes right on rejoicing over me finding my soul, becoming a true artist. I don't feel the gift flowing any differently down my arm to spread itself on canvas. Still don't do nothing more than copy down the truth my eyes see. I simply can't be sure anymore what the truth is, and my vision is marred with grief, suspicion, and doubt. Maybe that's what he meant in the first place, and if he did, I'm right glad he couldn't explain hisself no better. I'd'a run like hell if I'd knowed what I was getting myself into.

My trademark alone has made me famous. Every canvas, every frame carries a burn mark. Memory of the fire that swallowed my early work, people say. They don't got any idea how I worry about Mr. Shadrack, what with thinking about that nest of shadders Mrs. Beaudeaux found in his room and then him never coming home. They don't know my pockets is filled with matches and how quick they fly to my hand when I see them flitty little things out the corner of my eye. They never see the singe marks I treat my bedsheets to every night afore climbing into bed. ❄

Carrie Martin writes: "I recently drove a thirty-foot truck across the country, moving from New York to Oregon, and now work as a secretary for the Oregon School Employees Association. I share a small apartment with my daughter Laura, her cat Willow, my son James, and his cat Dance. We're enjoying the west, and looking forward to a winter of rain instead of snow." Carrie's story "Eighty Shen" won a Cauldron recently, and she has also now had stories published in *Aberrations* and others accepted for publication by *Aboriginal, Next Phase*, and *Lords of Eternal Darkness* (Sirius Publications).

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk has been working as a professional artist for over 15 years. She is a two-time recipient of the Canadian Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement. Her artwork has appeared in numerous publications and is now included on the CD-ROM "Atlantis to the Stars". Lynne lives near Vancouver, B.C., with the lovely and talented Steve Fahnestalk.

EDITED BY DEBBIE NOTKIN AND THE SECRET FEMINIST CABAL

Flying Cups and Saucers:
Gender Explorations in Science Fiction & Fantasy

EVER WONDER WHAT HAPPENED to the rest of the tea party when the saucers went off into space? Here's your chance to find out!

The James Tiptree, Jr. Award has been recognizing science fiction and fantasy novels and stories that explore and expand gender for the past six years. Although the award itself is given to one or two works of fiction a year, each jury also produces a "short list" of notable works that were considered for the award.

This first anthology contains almost all of the short fiction that has either won or been short-listed in the first five years of the award. Contributors include Ursula K. Le Guin ("The Matter of Seggri" and "Forgiveness Day"), Eleanor Arnason, L. Timmel Duchamp, Carol Emshwiller, Kelley Eskridge, Graham Joyce and Peter F. Hamilton, R. Garcia y Robertson, Delia Sherman, and more.

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THE LAST WORD

The printer had problems with some copies of issue 40. So if your copy had

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drop us a postcard or send us email and we will replace your issue. Be sure to give us your complete mailing address. You do **not** have to mail back the defective copy; just describe what was wrong with it.

We apologize — while we check some copies as we mail them, the problem this time was much more pervasive than usual. And the **printer** apologizes — in fact, even before we notified them of our problem, they had fired the person responsible.

Another error, this time from THE LAST WORD in issue 40: the Alexandria story contract is longer than three years.

The 1998 Fantasy Worlds Festival at the beginning of September was a lively event, attended by over 150 people. Programming ranged from a panel on the economics of fantasy to a live demonstration of armor-making. Mrs. Bradley had a wonderful time, and we even sold a few copies of our special anthology. (But there are copies left, and I urge you to buy one; there are some good stories and the book is — even if I did produce it — beautiful.)

Hal and Dorothy Heydt demonstrated how yarn is carded, spun, and plied, and talked about where different fibers come from. I had intended to demonstrate weaving but ended up spending most of my time assembling a floor loom — which was, I hope, still educational for the people who helped me or watched. But if there's more interest in weaving and spinning, particularly with reference to how the vocabulary has pervaded the language, write to me and I may do a column on the subject. There's some talk of repeating the convention in 1999 or 2000. Again, feedback is encouraged, especially if you live near Berkeley and could help with advance planning.

At the WorldCon in Baltimore, I was one of the Chesley Award presenters. It seemed to surprise the audience that I said I really enjoyed being an art director, but I find that my conversations with the artists I work with deepen my appreciation for fantasy fiction. The artists often see things in the stories that I would have missed if I hadn't seen their artwork, and our conversations range through all aspects of culture and history. One of the things I've learned is that each of the saints has a standard depiction. I knew that the Greek gods had "attributes" — she was always "bright-eyed Athena", never just "Athena" — but I knew nothing about the saints. However, the average European in the Middle Ages, even if he couldn't read, did know all about the saints and their symbols, and the stories that connected them. For instance, there's Saint Margaret, who was swallowed by a beast but who had the presence of mind to make the sign of the cross. The cross became real, and expanded until it pierced the body of the beast and freed Margaret. The artwork of the Middle Ages used the symbols of the saints to convey meaning. (Probably modern children do the same with cartoon superheroes.) So I was tickled to find in one of Marion's reference books, **THE DICTIONARY OF PHRASE AND FABLE**, by E. Cobham Brewer, a list of the saints and their symbols. Some are rather intriguing — Saint Agatha is described as "carrying her breasts in a dish" — and others are quite dramatic — Saint Ursula's symbols are a book and arrows; the book notes that Ursula was shot through with arrows by the Prince of the Huns. Saint Bartholomew has a knife, or a processional cross. Saint Mark is depicted seated, writing, with a lion couchant (sitting) at his feet. Theodore is armed with a halberd in his hand, a sabre by his side. And so on. All of this seems like good inspiration for fiction.

My local paper, the Oakland Tribune, recently ran a column headed "More works should be in the public domain". It pointed out that school orchestras had to pay expensive royalties to play public performances of some popular compositions, and that the Disney Corporation "is having apoplexy at the thought that the copyright on Mickey Mouse is due to expire in 2004." But how else can creators of ideas and entertainment, authors and composers and artists, publishers and producers, make a living? Mrs. Bradley wrote dozens of books before **MISTS OF AVALON** made her a household name, but if she hadn't been able to receive royalties from all the books, probably none but the first one or two would even exist. Does the columnist honestly believe that authors have no living expenses, that like the lilies of the field they exist on rainwater and earth? That the heirs of writers deserve to inherit nothing, though the heirs of oil company stockholders do well enough?

Still, I believe there should be flexibility in the royalties paid for various uses of copyrighted works. Syne Mitchell recently decided to rewrite a story, the one she sent in for the Fantasy Worlds anthology, to remove an e.e. cummings quotation at the beginning, because the cummings estate wanted $50.00 each time the story appeared in a new edition. Since Syne's lifetime royalties for the story are unlikely to ever exceed a few hundred dollars, $50.00 seemed like too large a percentage of that income. Similarly, another author friend of mine once wanted to use a line from the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" in a novel. Again, the price asked was quite steep, so the author rewrote the passage.

(Note that neither author even considered using the other author's material without payment or attribution — it would have been extremely unprofessional to have tried. Plus, the publisher in each case would likely have been liable.)

A more confusing situation arises when someone wants to use a novelist's characters and settings in their own writing. This is called "a derivative work" and likewise requires the permission of the copyright holder, even if every line of dialogue and every scene of description is their own. But if you want to see what the wrong side of the SFWA GriefCom looks like, just try it. I guarantee it won't be a pretty sight. When you see a "shared worlds" anthology, each contributor has made an agreement with the inventor of the world to set the stories there, and usually that inventor gets the lion's share of the book's royalties. Just as you can't move into some actor's Hollywood mansion and start driving his Ferrari, you can't write with someone else's characters or set your world in their universe, without pre-arranged (and paid for) permission.

On the other hand, invent your own characters and entertain the world sufficiently, and you might be able to buy your own mansion and Ferrari! — *Rachel E. Holmen*

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This latest release from Flowinglass Music takes the listener on a fabulous journey to the times of the Troubadours, Knights, and Ladies. Margaret Davis's debut recording features her shimmeringly beautiful singing accompanied by the magical interplay of Celtic harp, acoustic guitar, mandola, cello, recorders, hurdy-gurdy, percussion, and the Medieval vielle. This atmospherically lovely CD features Margaret's original arrangements of Celtic folk songs, Renaissance dances, and Medieval troubadour melodies. The lyrics, including some in French, Latin, and Gaelic, speak of love and longing, quests and revels, magic and transformation in an evocative style that will transport and enchant you. Fans of Loreena McKennitt, Enya, and Maire Brennan will enjoy this exciting recording. Experience the magic!

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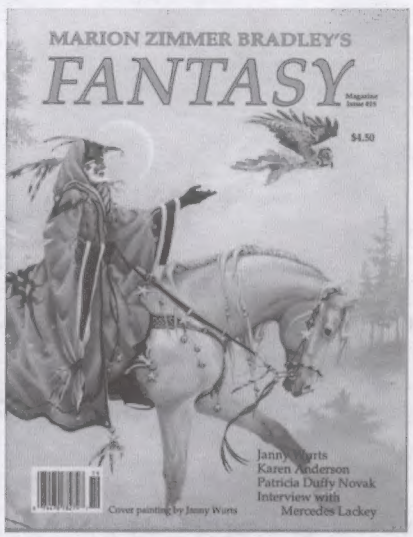

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❑ **Tiger, Tiger** by Carol E. Leever	❑ Alicia Austin
❑ **Gryphon Rider** by Cherith Baldry	❑ Michael Kucharski
❑ **Three Nights Penance 'til Lakkas Day** by Janna Silverstein	❑ Allison Hershey
❑ **Well Met By Moonlight** by Marion Z. Bradley	❑ George Barr
❑ **Steelwing** by Connie Wilkins	❑ K. L. Darnell
❑ **Shadders** by Carrie Martin	❑ Lynne T. Fahnestalk
	❑ Carl Lundgren - cover

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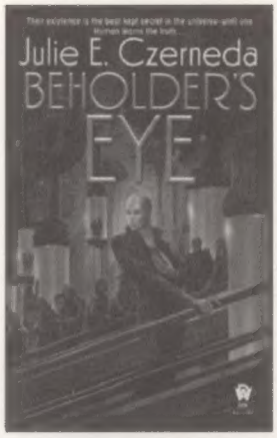

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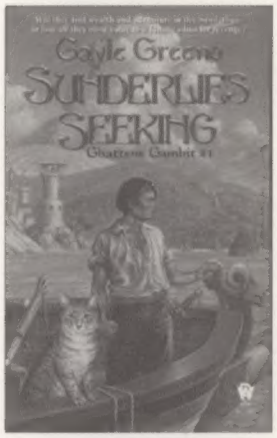
From the author of *A Thousand Words for Stranger*



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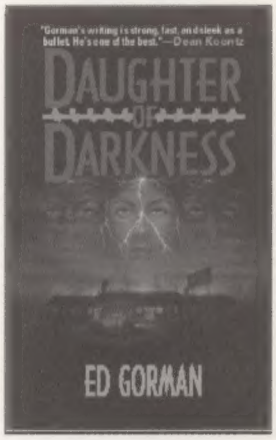

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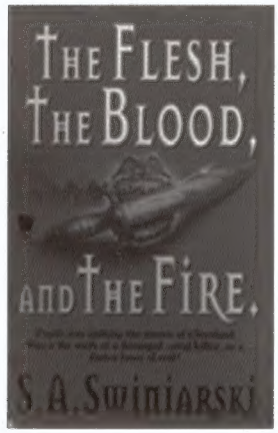

The Flesh, the Blood, and the Fire

S. A. Swiniarski *JULY*

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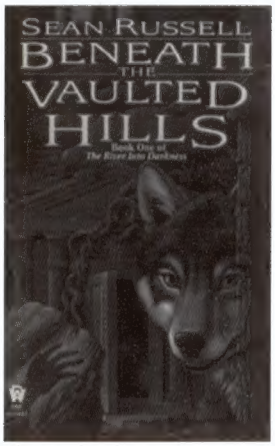
Between 1934 and 1944, Elliot Ness and his agents were in Cleveland investigating the Torso Killer case, when decapitated and bloodless bodies were found along the Kingsbury Run train tracks. After one of the most ineffective and unsuccessful manhunts in history, one Cleveland cop continues to follow the bloody trail and discovers the horrifying truth—that the law is not dealing with the mob or a serial killer—but with a community of vampires!



Beneath the Vaulted Hills

(*The River into Darkness, Book One*) *AUGUST*

Sean Russell

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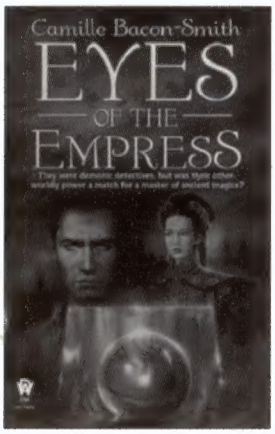
Lord Eldrich, the last of the world's great mages, has dedicated his life to eradicating all vestiges of magic from the world. But the fanatical Tellerites oppose him, and seek the key to immortality. Erasmus Flattery, haunted by his boyhood years living with the Eldrich, now must lead an expedition into the very bowels of the earth to search for a secret hidden since the time of the first Mages!



The Eyes of the Empress

Camille Bacon-Smith *AUGUST*

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Bradley, Ryan, and Davis, Private Investigators, is the most unique detective agency in Philadelphia, because the partners are not the mere mortals they appear. Solving earthly crimes ought to have been a cinch for them, but when someone began stealing the crystal balls which once belonged to a centuries-dead Empress of China, they were hard-pressed to track the thief down—dealing with demons is always difficult, even for them....

The Uncrowned King

(The Sun Sword, #2)

Michelle West *SEPTEMBER*

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The uneasy peace within the Dominion's borders was shattered when treacherous forces seized the crown by slaughtering all members of the ruling Clan Leonne. Now, in a neighboring empire, the sole surviving heir, a young man never previously destined to rule, must prove his worthiness to claim the crown, even as his family's murderers and their sinister demonic allies plot his doom....